

“Who is the Greatest”

Jeremiah 11:18-20; Mark 9:30-37

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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Many years ago 😊 I found myself packing up to move north from my home in Tennessee to New Jersey to begin my seminary training at Princeton Theological Seminary. Oftentimes when folks picture someone going off to seminary they imagine a serene environment with people studying the Bible, attending chapel every day, praying all the time... This is not at all what my experience of seminary was like!....For after all... People are people and that includes folks in seminary :)

When I arrived at the seminary I was immediately swept away into a world in which I felt as though I was competing with every person I encountered. There was this constant desire to outscore everyone on a test, to read more theology than my classmates, to have something more profound to say in precept (although I don't know who the judge of these supposedly profound comments was).... We would compete to see who could have more one on one conversations with a specific professor.... We would compete on who was doing more extra curricular activities... and we even competed to be accepted at the more “prestigious” field education placements....and on and on it went. I would describe details of what the intramural football games were like - but this is church and that would be inappropriate. Suffice it to say - the competition was heated and at times the games turned brutal! As a female attending the seminary there seemed to be almost a deeper sense of competition.... In that all of us women sort of intuitively knew there weren't as many options for women in ministry... and so we had to compete even harder to be the best....

And... I have found that this need to compete did not dissipate after leaving seminary. Rather, a need to be the best and the greatest is actually a constant partner in ministry... this program needs to be better than that program, this church wants more members than that church, This new worshiping community needs to be better than that new worshiping community...

It is my hunch that all of us in this room have at some point felt in competition with someone else....we are all at some level aching to know that we are the best at something.

I mean... Let's be real... Conversation about who is the greatest at said thing... is all around... The term GOAT gets thrown around a lot these days (Goat standing for Greatest of all time). I can tell you that I am always up to debate and argue that LeBron James deserves the title of GOAT over some other contenders 😊. Just drop the name Tom Brady and people will

begin the debate about his status as the GOAT... Simon Biles even had a literal goat embroidered on her Olympic uniform.

But I'm not here to judge.... Rather I think..... After reading our Gospel reading today that we can all breathe a collective sigh of relief and know that we are not the only ones who suffer from the need to be the greatest... This inclination to want to be the greatest and the argument about who is... goes all the way back to Jesus' closest friends and followers- even the disciples engaged in this debate.... Even they wanted to know who the GOAT of the disciples was.....

In our gospel reading today there are all sorts of odd human dynamics going on. First Jesus is *again* secretly teaching the disciples about his impending death and resurrections - and of course they again do not understand - and are afraid. In last week's lectionary passage Jesus told the Disciples this very same news - that he would be killed and raised after three days... and.... In last weeks passage Peter openly rebukes Jesus and argues with him. In response to Peter, Jesus calls peter "satan" I don't know about you, but I think I would be devastated if Jesus ever called me Satan.

And.... now in our passage today, we find the disciples once again not understanding what Jesus is telling them... but this time they do not argue with him, rather they stay quiet. I imagine they did not want what happened to Peter to happen to them. They would rather keep silent and politely nod... even if they do not understand.

Instead of engaging Jesus and asking any follow up questions while they were traveling they engaged in a different sort of debate.... They argued among themselves about "Who is the Greatest". Rather than trying to learn from Jesus' tough teaching, they fell into a more comfortable, more human conversation. I wonder if sometimes all of us focus on the competition and our own status rather than engaging with Jesus' teaching and radical call to be different in this world. One person in Bible Study this week supposed that the disciples might have been trying to figure out who the leader would be after Jesus' death.... Since he seems certain he is going to die they probably thought they would soon need a new leader.... This argument about who is the greatest was a way to get "organized" and stay on mission.... To make sure they had their affairs in decent and good order come what may.....

But.... Later that evening when they arrived at their host's home, when they had finally settled in for the evening... they are sitting around the fire, maybe finally eating a warm meal (maybe some fish seasoned with Israel's version of Old Bay or worcestershire sauce) And.... just when they get comfortable... Jesus decides to follow up on their debate. Jesus asks "What were you debating on the road today?" ...

I wonder if Jesus' questions sucked the air right out of the room, because Mark tells us that the disciples fall silent..... why were they silent?, Maybe they wanted to keep the peace- maybe they are a bit conflict adverse... maybe they were scared of being called Satan...

or maybe they are confused.... Maybe they are ashamed of their need to be considered the greatest... or for their need to come up with a contingency plan for after his death.

But Jesus does not scold them, rather Mark tells us, that Jesus picks up a small child... a baby... and tells them "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

It is important when reading this text to understand that when Jesus picks up a baby and tells them that the greatest is whoever welcomes this child... Jesus is not appealing to our modern understanding of children and babies. Rather at this time of history the least powerful, and the most overlooked were children. One commentary I read this week stated "To over sentimentalize Jesus here, is to miss his point all together." Rather, This statement was shocking to Jesus' disciples.... And... Again, they most likely did not understand what he was saying to them. But when Jesus picked up this baby he was making a radical statement about Power - in this world a Child had no power at all... Jesus is saying whoever welcomes those with no power at all... is the one who welcomes the one with all the power... Meaning (God the father).

Jesus is telling the disciples and Jesus is telling us what the kingdom of God is like... Jesus has the habit of doing this, he continues to flip upside down our human inclinations. Jesus tells us that Those who are most honored in the Kingdom of God are the folks we humans tend to think of last. This is not the first time Jesus instructs us in this teaching; rather Jesus insists on this time and again throughout the gospel - Jesus is telling us that "the kingdom breaks into the world in the least likely of places." The twelve disciples are constantly ignorant and afraid of this teaching...

So What do you think Jesus would like us to hear from him today... What does it look like to be about the work of welcoming those with little to no power? what does it mean to let go of our need to be the best and instead look for ways to welcome "God almighty" into our midst? How do we respond not in fear and confusion but instead with humility and welcome?

First, I want to take Jesus at face value and notice the fact that he uses a child to make his point to the disciples is important. It makes me wonder, What would it look like to listen to our children and youth as we seek to learn about God and God's kingdom? To see the youth of our church as not the future of our congregation, but as the present.... What do their young minds and experiences have to teach us about God - and what truths about God are we missing if we don't listen to them? Last Sunday as I was preparing and setting up for Youth Fellowship Zion David - a young member of our congregation - offered to help me carry my stuff to the Pavillion. And he had a testimony he was excited to share with me. When I had preached in July during my Children's message I had given the kids Okra Seeds- and had talked about all the things a seed needs to grow. So on Sunday, Zion David had a picture to show me... he had taken his seed home and planted it! It has now grown into an okra plant and is on its way to producing Okra! I have to tell you that my heart stopped when he showed me his picture. This

to me was a profound statement of faith (in me and in God) and a physical sign of God's kingdom made real on earth. My whole sermon that day was to go forth and plant seeds - and to be surprised at what might grow... and there Zion David was literally enacting that call.

Secondly, I think Jesus is asking us to examine who we think is important and who we overlook. The last time I preached I told you about a new worshipping community I was a part of in New Orleans called The Okra Abbey.... The Okra Abbey was a worshipping space in a garden and we had a labyrinth painted on the concrete. Every Friday Morning we held space for folks from the neighborhood to come and walk the labyrinth... one Friday morning it was my job to lead the labyrinth walk... I had the coffee and a simple breakfast ready... and I waited for folks to show up to walk the labyrinth.... But to my dismay on this morning no one showed up...I was sitting in the garden alone wondering if this whole Labyrinth thing was a *failed program*... when a guy from the neighborhood walked in... I kinda knew the guy... and it was clear to me that he was under the influence of something.... But on this particular morning, he walked up and we started talking and he asked me what the labyrinth was all about... I gave him a very simple and half hearted overview (in my head assuming he was too high to get anything out of it) and then sent him on his way to walk. He walked the labyrinth for what seemed like an hour.... he kept stopping and kneeling... and crying... and praying.... Some folks from the neighborhood walked in to get coffee and asked me "what's he doing over there!" but when he was done he walked over to me and began to tell me about his experience... In the following moments I was astounded and convicted.... I had thought this person had nothing to teach me... but rather through his testimony he taught me all that the labyrinth has to offer, and he preached the gospel to me... For the next hour we sat and talked and he told me all the ways his labyrinth walk that morning had revealed to him different truths about God. One truth that I think about often, was that he realized the labyrinth is not a maze and even though at times on his walk he didn't know where he was going - when he got to the center, he realized he was never Lost, rather he was with God the whole time - and he said to me, that is also true about our lives. I have always been so thankful for what God revealed to me that Friday morning.

Finally, I think Jesus is asking us to let go of our need to compete with one another and to even stop competing with ourselves. I hear Jesus saying "be less concerned with perfection and take risks that may not bring reward." The kingdom of God is not worried about who is the greatest; rather, the kingdom of God is about the work of broadening our scope of welcome and bringing folks into focus who we might disregard or not even notice.

One of my personal hero's is a man named Bryan Stevenson, you might have heard of him... his book Just Mercy was recently turned into a movie.... You might have seen it... but I HIGHLY recommend the book But for those who did not see the movie, Bryan Stevenson is a civil rights lawyer and founder of the Equal Justice initiative - I will end with a today with a quote from his book Just Mercy, Mr. Stevenson say

I've come to believe that the true measure of our character of our society, cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected

among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.”

As we go forth, may we hear Jesus’ instruction and be about this work.
Amen