

Greatness

Sunday, September 19th, 2021

Pentecost XVII ~ Mark 9:30-37

Nancy Wright-DeKuyper, Christ Church Lay Reader

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" is a question I'm sure we were all asked at one time or another when we were young.

When I was barely a teenager, I dreamed about becoming a doctor. I studied the classic reference work, Gray's Anatomy, and buried myself in books about the history of medicine and surgery.

I admired scientists like Marie Curie and Louis Pasteur and read their biographies and absorbed details of their discoveries and contributions to science and medicine.

One of the most interesting pioneers of modern medicine was a woman, a British nurse known as "*the Lady with the Lamp*."

Florence Nightingale tended to the soldiers during the Crimean War in the 1850s, and became famous as the mother of modern nursing. Her experiences as a nurse during the Crimean War were foundational in her views about sanitation and improving and changing hospital care. Upon coming back home, she was treated as a hero, and Queen Victoria gave her an engraved brooch now known as the Nightingale Jewel, along with \$250,000. She used the money to establish St. Thomas' Hospital and the Nightingale Training School for Nurses in 1860. Her efforts to reform healthcare greatly influenced the quality of patient medical wellness and treatment in the 19th and 20th centuries. Perhaps the most important work she did was to bring professional, trained, paid nurses into the workhouse infirmaries, the dreaded institutions of Victorian England.

Florence Nightingale was an active social reformer and devoted Christian, her life of faith in action. Here were the poorest of the poor and most desperate of God's people, those greatest in need.

She said, "*If I could give you information of my life it would be to show how a woman of very ordinary ability has been led by God in strange and unaccustomed paths to do in His service what He has done in her...*

And if I could tell you all, you would see how God has done all, and I nothing. I have worked hard, very hard, that is all; and I have never refused God anything... To be a fellow worker with God is the highest aspiration of which we can conceive man capable. God spoke to me and called me to His service. What form this service was to take the voice did not say... Life is a splendid gift. There is nothing small in it. Far the greatest things grow by God's law out of the smallest."

Florence Nightingale was a humble woman; and to be truly great, we must all be humble.

Which brings us to today's Gospel lesson...

Three times in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus predicts his own death, what we as Christians have come to call his Passion. Last week we heard the first prediction of his suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection in Chapter 8 (v 31-33). Today's Gospel reading is the second prediction, and we will hear his third prediction the Sunday after Thanksgiving with the selected verses from Chapter 10 (v 35-45).

On none of these occasions do the disciples catch on to what Jesus is saying.

Today, they spend their time squabbling, arguing who is the greatest among them while walking the road to Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee, heading south on the long journey to Jerusalem.

Jesus sits, as was the custom of teachers, indicating it was lesson time, yet again.

Jesus built his lessons around common, ordinary things that people knew about – farming, business, the people themselves, whether rich or poor, powerful or weak, old or young.

His followers and disciples weren't paying attention to his words, lacking understanding, still too self-absorbed in their mental quest of greatness to grasp what Jesus was trying to impart: that he was soon to die, and prepare his disciples for his death on the cross.

We also have to understand how children were regarded two thousand years ago, and which explains why a child becomes part of the lesson. Like today, children represent the future generation of the family; back in Jesus' time they were considered more of a liability; they participated in the household work, but were another mouth to feed; they were consumers, not producers. They had no rights, no status, no economic value.

Children symbolized dependency and powerlessness, one of the lowest stations in life. (*I Want To Be Great, Don't You? By Michael K. Marsh, Interrupting the Silence, 2018*)

The disciples valued position in the pecking order of power or greatness.

Jesus valued the lowly, the most vulnerable. He explains that a leader doesn't seek power; he seeks ways to help the powerless.

Jesus tells them that in God's Kingdom the definition of greatness is reversed from what we would expect, that whoever wants to be first must be last and servant to all. That is his answer to their question, "*Who is the greatest?*"

If you want to be the greatest, be the least.

One of the greatest preachers in the last 200 years was Charles Sturgeon. He composed and preached more than 3600 sermons and authored dozens of books. He wrote in reference to our Gospel passage, "*This is the only way to get to the front of Christ's army—he who would be chief, must always be aiming at the rear rank, willing to do the most humble service and to be the lowest menial in his Master's service. Only in this way can we rise. In Christ's Kingdom, the way to go up is to go down. Sink self and you shall surely rise.*" (Sermon #3188, "Discipline in Christ's Army" spurgeongems.org)

This is a lifelong and difficult lesson to learn. We live in a world where we compare ourselves to others, yet, to become a servant in the Kingdom of God, we must consciously turn self into servant.

In fact, in order to be first, we must be willing to be last... to be a servant.

We need to be willing to see the needs of the people around us and work to make their lives better.

Being first isn't most important. We will find greatness through serving others.

This makes me think of our current world pandemic. Greatness is in serving others ~ our healthcare workers, our humble servants, who have been on the front lines for almost two years, caring for the sick, the elderly, the weak, and the dying and now, unfortunately, the young. They are risking their lives to protect the lives of others.

In Mark, verse 37, Jesus takes a child in his arms explaining the concept of a humble servant. "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*"

Jesus tells the disciples to "welcome" a child and in so doing they would "welcome" both him and his Father / the one who had sent him. The Greek word used there—*dexomai*—not only means a general welcome but also literally receiving someone into their arms. (*The Lectionary Gospel: Mark 9:30-37* by Scott Hoezee, Center for Excellence in Preaching, 2015)

Florence Nightingale believed that God was to be found in the heart of every person: "*Look for his thought, his feeling, his purpose; in a word, his spirit within you, without, behind you, before you. It is indeed omnipresent. Work your true work and you will find his presence in yourself.*"

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.

Amen

Sources include:

I Want To Be Great, Don't You? By Michael K. Marsh, *Interrupting the Silence*, 2018

The Lectionary Gospel: Mark 9:30-37 by Scott Hoezee, Center for Excellence in Preaching, 2015

Welcoming the Child: The Politics of Mark by Rev. Amy Allen, *Political Theology Network*, 2012

Humility by Chris Mueller, 2013, Media Library

Florence Nightingale: Faith and Work, Lynn McDonald, PhD, University of Guelph, 2005

Florence Nightingale quotes: thefamouspeople.com; everydaypower.com; history.com 2009

textweek.com; sermoncentral.com