

Who's First?

Psalm 54; Mark 9:30-37

Sunday, September 22, 2024

Carol Stepp, Commissioned Pastor

Surprise! The scripture begins with the disciples not getting it!! Not getting it about two things in fact! First, they don't understand what Jesus is saying about his impending death and second, well, we'll get to that!

So, the knuckleheads go off on a tangent and start arguing. Never passing up a teachable moment, Jesus asks them what they are talking about. But the cat has got their tongues! Why?

Because they are too embarrassed to admit what they were arguing about! It's easy for us to shake our heads in disbelief at their seemingly silly argument. And then we look again, and we can see ourselves mirrored back, can't we?

So, what is the embarrassing subject?

They want to know who the best among them is! The Top Dog! The greatest! Perhaps the one who got to walk right next to Jesus and give all the orders. A great person in their world had a lot of power and was certainly looked up to. Someone who was likely to be obeyed and admired.

But Jesus is confusing them by scooping up a little kid on his knee and telling the disciples that whoever welcomes a child like this welcomes him. Suddenly it seems like Jesus has gone from saying something a little odd – to be first you have to be last – to saying something that sounds kind of crazy. In the 1st Century world, children were nobody's. Oh, of course, their parents loved them, but they had no rights, no influence, no standing. They were utterly dependent, utterly vulnerable, utterly powerless. So, how could caring for a child count as greatness? It's crazy.

Now, in our world, a great person might be described as someone who is superior or who possesses a natural ability to be better than all others. An example would be Napoleon, one of the greatest wartime leaders. Or it might be said that George Washington achieved greatness in his lifetime. Or Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon is certainly a great person. It could be said that "greatness" is a definite and identifiable quality.

It's easy for us to regularly succumb to the world's standards of greatness, which are usually yoked with power over others, wealth, control, status, influence, etc. Sometimes people think that to become first one must step on others. Or one who needs to shove people to the side to get their own needs met.

I remember when lining up in China, those with "Sharpest Elbows" got to be first! Often people who want to be first are inconsiderate and uncaring. Even manipulative. Ouch...who would want to be thought of as that?

Just notice the feelings and words that come up inside of you as you think of someone who puts herself, or himself, first. Har to admit, but the unpleasant face of envy, jealousy and righteousness are creeping up behind you, right?

But the world we live in has brainwashed us into believing that instead of loving and supporting one another, we have to compete and defeat all those who might get in the way of us being, doing and having whatever it is we want to achieve. But I wonder whether that is the most satisfying way of living life.

It seems we are always establishing pecking order of greatness. Look at the pecking orders in our world and country today. They are all around us. We live with,, and participate in them, even if we did not create them.

Citizens are greater than resident aliens who are greater than illegal aliens. The educated are greater than the under or uneducated. The rich are greater than the poor. The employed are greater than the unemployed. The gifted and talented student is greater than the ordinary student.

I obviously don't know what the disciples said or how their argument about greatness really went, but I'm convinced it did not bring out the best in them.

Philosopher Lao Tzu had the right idea when he said, "He who rushes ahead doesn't go far." For example, when you've seen that jerk cutting in and out of traffic to get ahead of every other can and then meet him at the stop light stuck behind a slow poke. It's great when you can jump ahead of him when the light changes! Divine Justice!

But let's get back to the Bible story...

I can easily imagine each disciple making a case for his own greatness and a case against being first for the others. Just imagine them quibbling amongst themselves and guess what they might be thinking...

- Maybe Simon or Andrew started claiming to be the greatest because they were the first disciples called and seniority matters. But others would argue that Jesus said a little child comes first.
- Or maybe Peter said that it should be him because Jesus said, “you are the rock on which I will build my church.” But the others countered, “No way is it you, Peter! Jesus rebuked you and called you Satan. That’s not so great.”

We shake our heads in confusion or disbelief at their seemingly silly arguments. And then we look again, and we see ourselves mirrored back, don’t we?

I mean think about it. Last place? Really? I don’t think I’ve ever argued about or striven to be in last place. Have you? Last place is the last place I want to be in. And I suspect that’s true for you too. First is definitely better!

Our daughter and son-in-law had been trying for four years to buy a house in Washington DC. After incessant searching they found the perfect house for under a million...which is quite a feat in DC for a starter home! So, they wrote a contract and a convincing letter that tugged on the heart strings of the elderly owners. Then we, including the Ladies Bible Study, proceeded to pray that they would be the first to be considered!

Lo, and behold, they were! Unfortunately, although they were the first considered, their offer came in second place. And we all know what coming in second place means in our world: you are the first loser!

Then there was the time when I competed in the 3-legged race at the grade school Field Day. My friend Susie Burns and I were so far ahead we could taste First Place!!! And then our belt broke!!! Guess what place we came in? Raise your hand if you would like to switch places with Susie and Me!

Sadly, we quickly learn to measure ourselves against one another as we seek to discern our place in the world. Much of life, as we live it now, can be experience as competitions...as to who is best. Or at least better! We have completely misunderstood what greatness is really about. Here Jesus is reversing everything we thought we knew or had been told about greatness.

It's certainly not what most of us have been taught in school. Greatness, we assume, implies power, accomplishment, fame, wealth and all the other things that allow you to do things, to influence people, to make things go your way.

But in this scripture Jesus turns the idea of greatness on its’ ear! His idea of greatness is determined by weakness and vulnerability. By service and sacrifice. By humility and honor.

By truthfulness and faithfulness. We are called to personify this kind of greatness, so that the world can witness the true meaning of greatness born out of love.

Jesus really drives the point home in verse 35, when on the way they are arguing with one another about who was the greatest. “He sat down, called the twelve, and said tot them. ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’

I’m thinking what Jesus means is:

- Putting others first.
- Committing yourself to promoting the growth of others.
- Sharing power and empowering people to do their best.
- And building community.

Jesus’ way is not the world’s way – the world’s model of up-down. The “I’m in charge, you WILL listen to me,” is completely wrong. God wants His people who are leaders to lead by example, to lead by serving, to put others first, and to do it with no desire for something in exchange. Greatness is building up and helping others.

Do you want to be great? “Become great in one simple step...SERVE. That is all there is to it. It’s a simple step, no one said it was an easy step. It is counter-intuitive and it goes completely against our human nature!

Make no mistake. This is hard stuff, absolutely and totally different than what we’re used to – whether in the 1st Century or the 21st. And so, it was hard for the disciples and it’s hard for us. They didn’t understand what Jesus meant, and so fell into the trap of putting themselves ahead of everyone else. We will often do the same, looking out for ourselves rather than others, trusting less in God for our security that we do our 401Ks, shutting others out rather than inviting them in, seeking our welfare, rather than that of those around us.

But friends here is what we must remember: Jesus is always naming and calling for the best in us. For God’s sake, for the sake of the world, for the sake of ourselves and on another: Let’s stop arguing about who is the greatest and start SERVING!! Amen.

Who's First?

Psalm 54; Mark 9:30-37

Sunday, September 22, 2024

Carol Stepp, Commissioned Pastor

Surprise! The scripture begins with the disciples not getting it!! Not getting it about two things in fact! First, they don't understand what Jesus is saying about his impending death and second, well, we'll get to that!

So, the knuckleheads go off on a tangent and start arguing. Never passing up a teachable moment, Jesus asks them what they are talking about. But the cat has got their tongues! Why?

Because they are too embarrassed to admit what they were arguing about! It's easy for us to shake our heads in disbelief at their seemingly silly argument. And then we look again, and we can see ourselves mirrored back, can't we?

So, what is the embarrassing subject?

They want to know who the best among them is! The Top Dog! The greatest! Perhaps the one who got to walk right next to Jesus and give all the orders. A great person in their world had a lot of power and was certainly looked up to. Someone who was likely to be obeyed and admired.

But Jesus is confusing them by scooping up a little kid on his knee and telling the disciples that whoever welcomes a child like this welcomes him. Suddenly it seems like Jesus has gone from saying something a little odd – to be first you have to be last – to saying something that sounds kind of crazy. In the 1st Century world, children were nobody's. Oh, of course, their parents loved them, but they had no rights, no influence, no standing. They were utterly dependent, utterly vulnerable, utterly powerless. So, how could caring for a child count as greatness? It's crazy.

Now, in our world, a great person might be described as someone who is superior or who possesses a natural ability to be better than all others. An example would be Napoleon, one of the greatest wartime leaders. Or it might be said that George Washington achieved greatness in his lifetime. Or Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon is certainly a great person. It could be said that "greatness" is a definite and identifiable quality.

It's easy for us to regularly succumb to the world's standards of greatness, which are usually yoked with power over others, wealth, control, status, influence, etc. Sometimes people think that to become first one must step on others. Or one who needs to shove people to the side to get their own needs met.

I remember when lining up in China, those with "Sharpest Elbows" got to be first! Often people who want to be first are inconsiderate and uncaring. Even manipulative. Ouch...who would want to be thought of as that?

Just notice the feelings and words that come up inside of you as you think of someone who puts herself, or himself, first. Har to admit, but the unpleasant face of envy, jealousy and righteousness are creeping up behind you, right?

But the world we live in has brainwashed us into believing that instead of loving and supporting one another, we have to compete and defeat all those who might get in the way of us being, doing and having whatever it is we want to achieve. But I wonder whether that is the most satisfying way of living life.

It seems we are always establishing pecking order of greatness. Look at the pecking orders in our world and country today. They are all around us. We live with,, and participate in them, even if we did not create them.

Citizens are greater than resident aliens who are greater than illegal aliens. The educated are greater than the under or uneducated. The rich are greater than the poor. The employed are greater than the unemployed. The gifted and talented student is greater than the ordinary student.

I obviously don't know what the disciples said or how their argument about greatness really went, but I'm convinced it did not bring out the best in them.

Philosopher Lao Tzu had the right idea when he said, "He who rushes ahead doesn't go far." For example, when you've seen that jerk cutting in and out of traffic to get ahead of every other can and then meet him at the stop light stuck behind a slow poke. It's great when you can jump ahead of him when the light changes! Divine Justice!

But let's get back to the Bible story...

I can easily imagine each disciple making a case for his own greatness and a case against being first for the others. Just imagine them quibbling amongst themselves and guess what they might be thinking...

- Maybe Simon or Andrew started claiming to be the greatest because they were the first disciples called and seniority matters. But others would argue that Jesus said a little child comes first.
- Or maybe Peter said that it should be him because Jesus said, “you are the rock on which I will build my church.” But the others countered, “No way is it you, Peter! Jesus rebuked you and called you Satan. That’s not so great.”

We shake our heads in confusion or disbelief at their seemingly silly arguments. And then we look again, and we see ourselves mirrored back, don’t we?

I mean think about it. Last place? Really? I don’t think I’ve ever argued about or striven to be in last place. Have you? Last place is the last place I want to be in. And I suspect that’s true for you too. First is definitely better!

Our daughter and son-in-law had been trying for four years to buy a house in Washington DC. After incessant searching they found the perfect house for under a million...which is quite a feat in DC for a starter home! So, they wrote a contract and a convincing letter that tugged on the heart strings of the elderly owners. Then we, including the Ladies Bible Study, proceeded to pray that they would be the first to be considered!

Lo, and behold, they were! Unfortunately, although they were the first considered, their offer came in second place. And we all know what coming in second place means in our world: you are the first loser!

Then there was the time when I competed in the 3-legged race at the grade school Field Day. My friend Susie Burns and I were so far ahead we could taste First Place!!! And then our belt broke!!! Guess what place we came in? Raise your hand if you would like to switch places with Susie and Me!

Sadly, we quickly learn to measure ourselves against one another as we seek to discern our place in the world. Much of life, as we live it now, can be experience as competitions...as to who is best. Or at least better! We have completely misunderstood what greatness is really about. Here Jesus is reversing everything we thought we knew or had been told about greatness.

It's certainly not what most of us have been taught in school. Greatness, we assume, implies power, accomplishment, fame, wealth and all the other things that allow you to do things, to influence people, to make things go your way.

But in this scripture Jesus turns the idea of greatness on its’ ear! His idea of greatness is determined by weakness and vulnerability. By service and sacrifice. By humility and honor.

By truthfulness and faithfulness. We are called to personify this kind of greatness, so that the world can witness the true meaning of greatness born out of love.

Jesus really drives the point home in verse 35, when on the way they are arguing with one another about who was the greatest. “He sat down, called the twelve, and said tot them. ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’

I’m thinking what Jesus means is:

- Putting others first.
- Committing yourself to promoting the growth of others.
- Sharing power and empowering people to do their best.
- And building community.

Jesus’ way is not the world’s way – the world’s model of up-down. The “I’m in charge, you WILL listen to me,” is completely wrong. God wants His people who are leaders to lead by example, to lead by serving, to put others first, and to do it with no desire for something in exchange. Greatness is building up and helping others.

Do you want to be great? “Become great in one simple step...SERVE. That is all there is to it. It’s a simple step, no one said it was an easy step. It is counter-intuitive and it goes completely against our human nature!

Make no mistake. This is hard stuff, absolutely and totally different than what we’re used to – whether in the 1st Century or the 21st. And so, it was hard for the disciples and it’s hard for us. They didn’t understand what Jesus meant, and so fell into the trap of putting themselves ahead of everyone else. We will often do the same, looking out for ourselves rather than others, trusting less in God for our security that we do our 401Ks, shutting others out rather than inviting them in, seeking our welfare, rather than that of those around us.

But friends here is what we must remember: Jesus is always naming and calling for the best in us. For God’s sake, for the sake of the world, for the sake of ourselves and on another: Let’s stop arguing about who is the greatest and start SERVING!! Amen.

Who's First?

Psalm 54; Mark 9:30-37

Sunday, September 22, 2024

Carol Stepp, Commissioned Pastor

Surprise! The scripture begins with the disciples not getting it!! Not getting it about two things in fact! First, they don't understand what Jesus is saying about his impending death and second, well, we'll get to that!

So, the knuckleheads go off on a tangent and start arguing. Never passing up a teachable moment, Jesus asks them what they are talking about. But the cat has got their tongues! Why?

Because they are too embarrassed to admit what they were arguing about! It's easy for us to shake our heads in disbelief at their seemingly silly argument. And then we look again, and we can see ourselves mirrored back, can't we?

So, what is the embarrassing subject?

They want to know who the best among them is! The Top Dog! The greatest! Perhaps the one who got to walk right next to Jesus and give all the orders. A great person in their world had a lot of power and was certainly looked up to. Someone who was likely to be obeyed and admired.

But Jesus is confusing them by scooping up a little kid on his knee and telling the disciples that whoever welcomes a child like this welcomes him. Suddenly it seems like Jesus has gone from saying something a little odd – to be first you have to be last – to saying something that sounds kind of crazy. In the 1st Century world, children were nobody's. Oh, of course, their parents loved them, but they had no rights, no influence, no standing. They were utterly dependent, utterly vulnerable, utterly powerless. So, how could caring for a child count as greatness? It's crazy.

Now, in our world, a great person might be described as someone who is superior or who possesses a natural ability to be better than all others. An example would be Napoleon, one of the greatest wartime leaders. Or it might be said that George Washington achieved greatness in his lifetime. Or Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon is certainly a great person. It could be said that "greatness" is a definite and identifiable quality.

It's easy for us to regularly succumb to the world's standards of greatness, which are usually yoked with power over others, wealth, control, status, influence, etc. Sometimes people think that to become first one must step on others. Or one who needs to shove people to the side to get their own needs met.

I remember when lining up in China, those with "Sharpest Elbows" got to be first! Often people who want to be first are inconsiderate and uncaring. Even manipulative. Ouch...who would want to be thought of as that?

Just notice the feelings and words that come up inside of you as you think of someone who puts herself, or himself, first. Har to admit, but the unpleasant face of envy, jealousy and righteousness are creeping up behind you, right?

But the world we live in has brainwashed us into believing that instead of loving and supporting one another, we have to compete and defeat all those who might get in the way of us being, doing and having whatever it is we want to achieve. But I wonder whether that is the most satisfying way of living life.

It seems we are always establishing pecking order of greatness. Look at the pecking orders in our world and country today. They are all around us. We live with,, and participate in them, even if we did not create them.

Citizens are greater than resident aliens who are greater than illegal aliens. The educated are greater than the under or uneducated. The rich are greater than the poor. The employed are greater than the unemployed. The gifted and talented student is greater than the ordinary student.

I obviously don't know what the disciples said or how their argument about greatness really went, but I'm convinced it did not bring out the best in them.

Philosopher Lao Tzu had the right idea when he said, "He who rushes ahead doesn't go far." For example, when you've seen that jerk cutting in and out of traffic to get ahead of every other car and then meet him at the stop light stuck behind a slow poke. It's great when you can jump ahead of him when the light changes! Divine Justice!

But let's get back to the Bible story...

I can easily imagine each disciple making a case for his own greatness and a case against being first for the others. Just imagine them quibbling amongst themselves and guess what they might be thinking...

- Maybe Simon or Andrew started claiming to be the greatest because they were the first disciples called and seniority matters. But others would argue that Jesus said a little child comes first.
- Or maybe Peter said that it should be him because Jesus said, “you are the rock on which I will build my church.” But the others countered, “No way is it you, Peter! Jesus rebuked you and called you Satan. That’s not so great.”

We shake our heads in confusion or disbelief at their seemingly silly arguments. And then we look again, and we see ourselves mirrored back, don’t we?

I mean think about it. Last place? Really? I don’t think I’ve ever argued about or striven to be in last place. Have you? Last place is the last place I want to be in. And I suspect that’s true for you too. First is definitely better!

Our daughter and son-in-law had been trying for four years to buy a house in Washington DC. After incessant searching they found the perfect house for under a million...which is quite a feat in DC for a starter home! So, they wrote a contract and a convincing letter that tugged on the heart strings of the elderly owners. Then we, including the Ladies Bible Study, proceeded to pray that they would be the first to be considered!

Lo, and behold, they were! Unfortunately, although they were the first considered, their offer came in second place. And we all know what coming in second place means in our world: you are the first loser!

Then there was the time when I competed in the 3-legged race at the grade school Field Day. My friend Susie Burns and I were so far ahead we could taste First Place!!! And then our belt broke!!! Guess what place we came in? Raise your hand if you would like to switch places with Susie and Me!

Sadly, we quickly learn to measure ourselves against one another as we seek to discern our place in the world. Much of life, as we live it now, can be experience as competitions...as to who is best. Or at least better! We have completely misunderstood what greatness is really about. Here Jesus is reversing everything we thought we knew or had been told about greatness.

It's certainly not what most of us have been taught in school. Greatness, we assume, implies power, accomplishment, fame, wealth and all the other things that allow you to do things, to influence people, to make things go your way.

But in this scripture Jesus turns the idea of greatness on its’ ear! His idea of greatness is determined by weakness and vulnerability. By service and sacrifice. By humility and honor.

By truthfulness and faithfulness. We are called to personify this kind of greatness, so that the world can witness the true meaning of greatness born out of love.

Jesus really drives the point home in verse 35, when on the way they are arguing with one another about who was the greatest. “He sat down, called the twelve, and said tot them. ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’

I’m thinking what Jesus means is:

- Putting others first.
- Committing yourself to promoting the growth of others.
- Sharing power and empowering people to do their best.
- And building community.

Jesus’ way is not the world’s way – the world’s model of up-down. The “I’m in charge, you WILL listen to me,” is completely wrong. God wants His people who are leaders to lead by example, to lead by serving, to put others first, and to do it with no desire for something in exchange. Greatness is building up and helping others.

Do you want to be great? “Become great in one simple step...SERVE. That is all there is to it. It’s a simple step, no one said it was an easy step. It is counter-intuitive and it goes completely against our human nature!

Make no mistake. This is hard stuff, absolutely and totally different than what we’re used to – whether in the 1st Century or the 21st. And so, it was hard for the disciples and it’s hard for us. They didn’t understand what Jesus meant, and so fell into the trap of putting themselves ahead of everyone else. We will often do the same, looking out for ourselves rather than others, trusting less in God for our security that we do our 401Ks, shutting others out rather than inviting them in, seeking our welfare, rather than that of those around us.

But friends here is what we must remember: Jesus is always naming and calling for the best in us. For God’s sake, for the sake of the world, for the sake of ourselves and on another: Let’s stop arguing about who is the greatest and start SERVING!! Amen.

Who's First?

Psalm 54; Mark 9:30-37

Sunday, September 22, 2024

Carol Stepp, Commissioned Pastor

Surprise! The scripture begins with the disciples not getting it!! Not getting it about two things in fact! First, they don't understand what Jesus is saying about his impending death and second, well, we'll get to that!

So, the knuckleheads go off on a tangent and start arguing. Never passing up a teachable moment, Jesus asks them what they are talking about. But the cat has got their tongues! Why?

Because they are too embarrassed to admit what they were arguing about! It's easy for us to shake our heads in disbelief at their seemingly silly argument. And then we look again, and we can see ourselves mirrored back, can't we?

So, what is the embarrassing subject?

They want to know who the best among them is! The Top Dog! The greatest! Perhaps the one who got to walk right next to Jesus and give all the orders. A great person in their world had a lot of power and was certainly looked up to. Someone who was likely to be obeyed and admired.

But Jesus is confusing them by scooping up a little kid on his knee and telling the disciples that whoever welcomes a child like this welcomes him. Suddenly it seems like Jesus has gone from saying something a little odd – to be first you have to be last – to saying something that sounds kind of crazy. In the 1st Century world, children were nobody's. Oh, of course, their parents loved them, but they had no rights, no influence, no standing. They were utterly dependent, utterly vulnerable, utterly powerless. So, how could caring for a child count as greatness? It's crazy.

Now, in our world, a great person might be described as someone who is superior or who possesses a natural ability to be better than all others. An example would be Napoleon, one of the greatest wartime leaders. Or it might be said that George Washington achieved greatness in his lifetime. Or Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon is certainly a great person. It could be said that "greatness" is a definite and identifiable quality.

It's easy for us to regularly succumb to the world's standards of greatness, which are usually yoked with power over others, wealth, control, status, influence, etc. Sometimes people think that to become first one must step on others. Or one who needs to shove people to the side to get their own needs met.

I remember when lining up in China, those with "Sharpest Elbows" got to be first! Often people who want to be first are inconsiderate and uncaring. Even manipulative. Ouch...who would want to be thought of as that?

Just notice the feelings and words that come up inside of you as you think of someone who puts herself, or himself, first. Har to admit, but the unpleasant face of envy, jealousy and righteousness are creeping up behind you, right?

But the world we live in has brainwashed us into believing that instead of loving and supporting one another, we have to compete and defeat all those who might get in the way of us being, doing and having whatever it is we want to achieve. But I wonder whether that is the most satisfying way of living life.

It seems we are always establishing pecking order of greatness. Look at the pecking orders in our world and country today. They are all around us. We live with,, and participate in them, even if we did not create them.

Citizens are greater than resident aliens who are greater than illegal aliens. The educated are greater than the under or uneducated. The rich are greater than the poor. The employed are greater than the unemployed. The gifted and talented student is greater than the ordinary student.

I obviously don't know what the disciples said or how their argument about greatness really went, but I'm convinced it did not bring out the best in them.

Philosopher Lao Tzu had the right idea when he said, "He who rushes ahead doesn't go far." For example, when you've seen that jerk cutting in and out of traffic to get ahead of every other car and then meet him at the stop light stuck behind a slow poke. It's great when you can jump ahead of him when the light changes! Divine Justice!

But let's get back to the Bible story...

I can easily imagine each disciple making a case for his own greatness and a case against being first for the others. Just imagine them quibbling amongst themselves and guess what they might be thinking...

- Maybe Simon or Andrew started claiming to be the greatest because they were the first disciples called and seniority matters. But others would argue that Jesus said a little child comes first.
- Or maybe Peter said that it should be him because Jesus said, “you are the rock on which I will build my church.” But the others countered, “No way is it you, Peter! Jesus rebuked you and called you Satan. That’s not so great.”

We shake our heads in confusion or disbelief at their seemingly silly arguments. And then we look again, and we see ourselves mirrored back, don’t we?

I mean think about it. Last place? Really? I don’t think I’ve ever argued about or striven to be in last place. Have you? Last place is the last place I want to be in. And I suspect that’s true for you too. First is definitely better!

Our daughter and son-in-law had been trying for four years to buy a house in Washington DC. After incessant searching they found the perfect house for under a million...which is quite a feat in DC for a starter home! So, they wrote a contract and a convincing letter that tugged on the heart strings of the elderly owners. Then we, including the Ladies Bible Study, proceeded to pray that they would be the first to be considered!

Lo, and behold, they were! Unfortunately, although they were the first considered, their offer came in second place. And we all know what coming in second place means in our world: you are the first loser!

Then there was the time when I competed in the 3-legged race at the grade school Field Day. My friend Susie Burns and I were so far ahead we could taste First Place!!! And then our belt broke!!! Guess what place we came in? Raise your hand if you would like to switch places with Susie and Me!

Sadly, we quickly learn to measure ourselves against one another as we seek to discern our place in the world. Much of life, as we live it now, can be experience as competitions...as to who is best. Or at least better! We have completely misunderstood what greatness is really about. Here Jesus is reversing everything we thought we knew or had been told about greatness.

It's certainly not what most of us have been taught in school. Greatness, we assume, implies power, accomplishment, fame, wealth and all the other things that allow you to do things, to influence people, to make things go your way.

But in this scripture Jesus turns the idea of greatness on its’ ear! His idea of greatness is determined by weakness and vulnerability. By service and sacrifice. By humility and honor.

By truthfulness and faithfulness. We are called to personify this kind of greatness, so that the world can witness the true meaning of greatness born out of love.

Jesus really drives the point home in verse 35, when on the way they are arguing with one another about who was the greatest. “He sat down, called the twelve, and said tot them. ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’

I’m thinking what Jesus means is:

- Putting others first.
- Committing yourself to promoting the growth of others.
- Sharing power and empowering people to do their best.
- And building community.

Jesus’ way is not the world’s way – the world’s model of up-down. The “I’m in charge, you WILL listen to me,” is completely wrong. God wants His people who are leaders to lead by example, to lead by serving, to put others first, and to do it with no desire for something in exchange. Greatness is building up and helping others.

Do you want to be great? “Become great in one simple step...SERVE. That is all there is to it. It’s a simple step, no one said it was an easy step. It is counter-intuitive and it goes completely against our human nature!

Make no mistake. This is hard stuff, absolutely and totally different than what we’re used to – whether in the 1st Century or the 21st. And so, it was hard for the disciples and it’s hard for us. They didn’t understand what Jesus meant, and so fell into the trap of putting themselves ahead of everyone else. We will often do the same, looking out for ourselves rather than others, trusting less in God for our security that we do our 401Ks, shutting others out rather than inviting them in, seeking our welfare, rather than that of those around us.

But friends here is what we must remember: Jesus is always naming and calling for the best in us. For God’s sake, for the sake of the world, for the sake of ourselves and on another: Let’s stop arguing about who is the greatest and start SERVING!! Amen.