

### “Who Is the Greatest?”

Suddenly things were quiet. The disciples had fallen silent. They had arrived at their destination, a house in Capernaum. On the road their discussion had been lively and intense, but with one question, Jesus silenced them all. “What were you talking about?”

The Bible doesn’t give much detail about their discussion, but it centered on a question that they were curious to answer: “Who is the greatest?”

It seems likely that three disciples were candidates for the “greatest disciple” award. Peter, James and John recently had gone with Jesus—and without the other disciples—up on a mountain. They saw Jesus transfigured so that the brightness of his glory showed around them. The other disciples probably didn’t know the whole story, because the three were instructed not to tell (see Mark 9:2-10).

Peter, who was never shy, might have mentioned, “I can’t really tell you, but that was amazing.”

Maybe his brother Andrew jumped in, “I don’t understand why you think you’re so special. Jesus called me to follow him at the same time that he called you. In fact, we were the first disciples. Maybe you and I are the greatest” (Mark 1:14-18).

James and John wouldn’t have liked that. They were at the Sea of Galilee the same day and were called to be Jesus’ disciples as well (Mark 1:19-20). And let’s face it, Andrew, this wasn’t the first time that Peter, James, and John were singled out by Jesus. They had been there when Jesus raised a dead girl to life, the daughter of the synagogue leader Jairus. They weren’t supposed to tell people about that either, but word like that has a way of getting around (Mark 5:37-43).

Matthew might have made a case for himself based on the dinner party that he threw for Jesus, but the others would quickly have reminded him that he was a tax collector. He was lucky that even fishermen associated with him (Mark 2:15-17).

Judas kept track of the money that they had (John 13:29). Peter walked on the water with Jesus (Matthew 14:29-31). Sure, but it wasn’t like the disciples had much money, and Peter, you fell in—and didn’t Jesus yell at you a while back. What was the name he called you, Satan?

Around and around it went, until someone stepped in to stop it. “What were you talking about?”  
Silence.

It may be interesting (perhaps even a little funny) to think about the disciples going through this discussion. And perhaps you’ve never had a discussion quite like it. But I suspect that question, “Who is the greatest” has been in your hearts or on your minds at some point.

That's who we are by nature, and that's what we do. We want to be great. We want to be the greatest. We like to compare ourselves to others to figure out ways for us to look good. I've been a member of the church longer. I give a larger portion of my income to church and charity. I'm just a really nice guy. I'm a better athlete, a better student, a better parent. I'm glad I don't handle things the way that person does. Maybe I'm not the greatest, but I'm pretty good!

Then God's Word asks us, "What are you talking about?" "What are you thinking about?" Can our reaction be any different than that of the disciples? Is our reaction any different than Adam and Eve ducking behind a tree and trying to hide in silence as God walked through the garden? We have no answer. We have no excuse. In our sinful human natures we wonder, "Who is the greatest?" And in our sinful human natures, we like to answer, "I am."

What makes this even more troubling is the context in which it occurs. In our text, the disciples had just heard Jesus predict his suffering and his death. If they wanted to compare themselves to someone, why not to Jesus? Why not to someone who was always loving and always serving others? Why not? Because they didn't understand.

Our text tells us, "[Jesus] **said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.'**"<sup>32</sup> **But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.**" We maybe wonder what would have happened if the disciples would have asked for clarification. "Excuse me Jesus, what do you mean about being killed and rising?" We have a vantage point that they were lacking. We have already learned the rest of the story. But think about it from their point of view. People don't rise from the dead. If Jesus was going to be betrayed, did that mean one of them would betray him?

And perhaps on some level the disciples really didn't want to understand. They didn't want to face the reality of what one of them might do to Jesus, that they might lose their Messiah to death, even if he intended to rise again. They certainly didn't want to admit that they were in any way responsible for his death.

And isn't that often our attitude as well? We know the fact that Jesus died for the sins of the world, but we don't like to admit that *we* desperately needed him to die *for us*. We don't want to rely on someone else when we're so accustomed to relying on ourselves. We don't like the idea that there is no way that I can have any part at all in my own salvation, because, after all, I'm really not that bad.

And that's the reason that Jesus explained to his disciples what was going to happen. That's the reason that he explains it to us. His purpose is not first and foremost to make us feel bad. His purpose is to teach us that we are absolutely assured of forgiveness. Yes, that means that we will feel bad when we realize how absolutely worthless we are in and of ourselves. That means that he wants us to let go of our pride and our selfish gloating. But more importantly it means that we can rely on him absolutely. The one who had every right to call himself the greatest became a servant. The one who had no sin of his own became a sinner by taking on the sins of the world. In the greatest act of self-sacrifice imaginable, Jesus allowed himself to be betrayed and put to death on the cross for you and for me and for twelve stubbornly selfish disciples.

And when God leads us to understand that, it changes our lives. We no longer ask “Who is the greatest?” We no longer answer “I am. I want to be the best and I believe that I can do it.” Instead the question becomes, “How can I serve others?” Jesus takes the whole concept of greatness and turns it on its head. Our text notes, **“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’”** Jesus is not saying that we should figure out who serves others the most so that we can crown that person the greatest. He is saying that greatness in his kingdom is found in service to others. And true service to others isn’t looking for titles or recognition.

Our text continues, **“[Jesus] took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.’”** That is an incredible example of the sort of selfless service that faith produces. When we serve by welcoming a little child, we are not looking for recognition, because we probably won’t get it from a child. We are not calculating how we might get ahead or advance our own interests. We are simply showing love.

Could it be so simple that we serve our Savior by welcoming children here at church? We could offer them a smile, say hello, make them feel welcome. We could remain calm at the few times that they interrupt or disturb our concentration. We could encourage them by welcoming children to Sunday School, and by encouraging parents to bring their children there. For those of us who are parents, we serve our children by meeting their physical and emotional needs and above all their spiritual needs by bringing them regularly to God’s Word. And as a congregation, we welcome children by reaching out with the gospel to families who have not heard it or do not yet believe it.

There were times like the one in our text today when Jesus’ disciples were silenced, when they were put in their place. But we rejoice to see many times recorded in Scripture when the disciples put their faith on display by their selfless service. For many of them, service took them to the point of losing their own lives. God accomplished that in them through his gospel. We rejoice that he grants us the same blessing of faith so that we, too, may serve others. And in doing so we may serve God.