

“Who Is The Greatest?”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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Psalm 1

Mark 9:30-37

‘...Jesus asked them,

“What were you arguing about along the way?”

*They had been arguing about which one of them was the greatest,
and so they did not answer.’*

Mark 9:33a-34

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to be great without worrying about who is ‘the greatest’.

Help us to bring out the best in each other.

Amen

Who is “The Greatest”? OK, besides... Mohammed Ali the boxer.

The answer is God. Right? We’re here in church, so... Yeah!

Let’s clear that up right now – God is the greatest!

God has no equal, because with God,

there is no comparison.

There is no opposite to God who created all things as it says in Genesis:

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...”

and that means everything and everyone within Heaven and Earth.

And even though God is good and the opposite of good is evil,

not even the Devil – which is evil, is the ‘opposite of God’,

because the Devil is a kind of angel,

and so, just another subordinate being –

that... happens to be insubordinate.

And though God created all things, the opposite of God

is not even “nothing”.

The opposite of God is not “nothing”,

because the opposite of “no-thing” is “all things”.

God has even created the circumstances for “nothing”

not to exist.

And if God created “all things”,

“all things” can’t be equal to that which created them in the first place.

So, God is the greatest.

So, let’s scale things down a bit –

Who is “The Greatest” – but where?

On Earth – OK, let’s say ‘humanity’, but as compared to what?

Willard, p.2

The tallest thing on the Earth is a mountain,

The biggest thing on the Earth is an ocean.

The oldest living thing is a patch of seaweed in the Mediterranean
that is thousands of years old.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/07/oldest-living-thing-seagrass_n_1259898.html

The first thing that had ever lived was probably bacteria

and that would have been millions and millions of years ago.

The tallest living creature is a tree

and the biggest creature that ever lived was a dinosaur

and the biggest living thing these days is a whale.

The fastest runner, the highest flyer, and the deepest swimmer awards

would all go to members of the Animal Kingdom of one form or another

though bacteria are generally disqualified

under suspicion that they may actually be some kind of steroid.

But in each of the categories of “Brains” and “Beauty”,

humanity just might have the edge for 1st Place –

then again, for Last Place, too.

And that depends on the day and who the judges are.

In the “Brains” Department, we have mastered the skills and created the tools
to go to the Moon and back again,

send satellites beyond the border of our Solar System,

build tall buildings, break the sound barrier,

explore the highest and deepest parts of the Earth,

help heal people with medical technologies,

communicate with people around the world instantaneously,

and provide almost limitless storage for just about all that we know.

Sounds pretty “Great”, but then..

we somehow can't quite figure out how to feed everybody,

we can't quite provide shelter or meaningful work for everybody,

we can't quite get passed superficial differences,

we can't quite stop hurting – or even killing each other

whether for reasons of national defense or for no reason at all.

So, we lose the “Beauty” Pageant along with the “Brains” Contest.

In the human race, things can get pretty ugly and awfully stupid.

We are liable to sabotage our best interests and do things prone to sin,

yet there is good in us, too.

We were created with a divine spark;

We were created ‘in the image of God’.

Willard, p.3

The greatest thing about us as human beings
is our potential to learn and do things differently.

We are created to see and reason and re-create –
we have the ability to make our world a better place.

We can be open to greatness that goes beyond self-fulfillment
to seeking the common good.

Jesus once said,

“Why do you call me good? No one is good but God.”

And religious experts through the ages have said
that this means humanity is hopelessly depraved
such that we can only be saved from this condition
by grace and not works.

But it doesn't mean we shouldn't try to do what is right –
it doesn't mean we can't do what is good.

Instead, we are expected to do what is right and good,
otherwise, why did Jesus get angry at times with his disciples
let alone his opponents like the scribes and Pharisees?

We are expected to love – and doesn't that cover
all that is right and true and good?

In 1st Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul wrote,
“Faith, hope, love abide – these three, but the greatest of these is love.”

When we love, we become like God –
we demonstrate the greatness of God just like Jesus did.

Jesus could be a tough cookie – more like Malcolm X than Martin Luther King,
but a durable love just the same, as it was demonstrated in the lives
of those two people.

When the disciples heard Jesus talk about his death and resurrection,
all they heard was the part about his death.

And so they began to talk about who would replace Jesus
as the leader of their movement –
who among them was great enough to take his place?

And when they got to where they were going,
Jesus asked them what they were talking about – though he already knew,
and they were all embarrassed, and rightfully so.

They were caught playing the power game – which is an unavoidable evil
if not a necessary one, in how any human group gets organized.

But the answer to the question of ‘Who is the greatest?’ – is you.

Willard, p.4

Without you, things don't get done.

Things don't get done in your life, your family, your village, your country,
or your church.

In his inaugural address as President of the United States,
John F. Kennedy said:

*Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world,
ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice
which we ask of you.*

*With a good conscience our only sure reward,
with history the final judge of our deeds,
let us go forth to lead the land we love,
asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that
here on earth, God's work must truly be our own.*

<http://www.quotedb.com/speeches/john-f-kennedy-inaugural-address>

The disciples asked themselves the question,

“Who is the greatest?” Who – among them, was the most like Christ?

And Jesus answered their question by placing a child before them

such that the key to being great like Christ

is to look at the world with a childlike optimism

that sees everything new and hasn't learned yet how to hate or fear –
only love.

And that's all you have to do to be great.

Amen

*Our Hebrew Scripture reading this morning is from the Psalms
which were used as hymns in the worship of ancient Israel.
Psalm 1 describes the different outcomes for those who
seek to do what is right and those who don't.*

- 1 God blesses those people who refuse evil advice
and won't follow sinners or join in sneering at God.
- 2 Instead, the Law of the Lord makes them happy,
and they think about it day and night.
- 3 They are like trees growing beside a stream,
trees that produce fruit in season and always have leaves.
Those people succeed in everything they do.
- 4 That isn't true of those who are evil,
because they are like straw blown by the wind.
- 5 Sinners won't have an excuse on the day of judgment,
and they won't have a place with the people of God.
- 6 The Lord protects everyone who follows him,
but the wicked follow a road that leads to ruin.

Inspired by Mark 9:30-37

As they went forth through the Galilee,

Jesus didn't want anyone to know where he was,
so that he could instruct his disciples, saying,

“The Son of Man, the True Heir of Humanity,
is to be handed over to people who shall kill him,
but after his death, rise on the third day.”

Yet they did not comprehend what he was saying
and they were afraid to question him.

When they got to his home in Capernaum and entered the house,

Jesus asked them,

“What were you discussing with each other on the road?”

But they kept silent, for they had argued on the road
about who among them was the greatest?

And Jesus invited them to sit down, and he said,

“If anyone wants to be Number One,
they have to be the last of every-one – to be the one who serves.”

And bringing a little child into their midst, Jesus picked the child up and said,

“Whoever welcomes someone like this little one on my behalf,
accepts me, and whoever welcomes me – doesn't just accept me,
but accepts the One who sent me.”