

Who is the Greatest? A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 19, 2021 The Rev. Robin Teasley

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

Mark 9:30-37

Who is the greatest? The one who appears to have a perfect life or the one who freely admits their imperfections? The one who knows the most or the one who refuses to brag about what they know? The one who gives the highest pledge to church or the one who volunteers to lead a group, teach a class, or pray from home? The one who accuses and condemns from a place of power or the one who speaks words of kindness and love from a place of poverty?

Somehow, we have come to a place where we think being great means being in control, being right, being independent. But scripture suggests that this was never what God intended, and as people of faith we sometimes need reminding that we are not in control, we are not the greatest. God alone is in control. God alone is great.

And yet, like the disciples, we argue about who is the greatest and we do this in lots of ways. From the time we are children pretending to be superheroes, then as youth who play sports and win trophies and medals, we are conditioned by the world to compare and contrast, to sort out one another according to abilities, gifts, and behaviors. We argue about which sports team or which athlete is the GOAT (the Greatest Of All Time). Tonight, in fact, a new documentary by Ken Burns premieres on Muhammad Ali, the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time.

Sometimes our competition for greatness causes harm by excluding those with different abilities, different religious beliefs, different skin color, or different political views. The many uncertainties of this pandemic have created an upwelling of anxiety and fear, and a jockeying for power and control, precisely because we are not comfortable with uncertainty or change. It makes us anxious. We long for a superhero and we are placing bets on every imposter that promises to save us. Who is the greatest?

But Jesus has something to say about greatness and he uses a child to make his point. Notice that in this passage he does not tell the disciples to be like a child, but to welcome the child, which is, he says, to welcome him and to welcome the One who sent him. We love children and they are precious to us; we will do almost anything for them. But in antiquity, children were not viewed this way. Children had no power and no status; they were last of all.

Jesus knows his disciples are allowing their egos to get the better of them as they travel the road to Capernaum. In a first century parking lot conversation, they are arguing about who among them will be the greatest. If indeed the authorities were to kill Jesus, who would be the leader, the one in power then? "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," Jesus tells them. They must be last, they must serve, and they must welcome those who are last of all. That is not what they expected Jesus to say and so they were silent. They did not understand and were afraid to ask him.

Following Jesus is not easy, and it means we must set aside our egos and personal desires so that all of God's children can be welcomed into God's loving embrace. It takes superhero power to follow Jesus, and we have been given some superhero power by virtue of our baptism! James tells us how to identify and employ our superhero power – not so that we can be the greatest but that we might serve one another in wisdom and love. This is power that saves and loves, not power that argues or demands or harms.

James exhorts us to show by our good life that our works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. The wisdom James is talking about is from above; it's not from the internet or the politicians. It is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. This kind of holy wisdom imparts superhero power.

When we allow the world's definition of greatness to influence our lives, James so accurately points out that there will be conflicts and disputes that come from our cravings that are at war within us. He says, "You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. These are convicting words from James, and though we might never actually murder someone, we are all too capable of murdering our planet, murdering relationships, murdering the faith and hope of others with our conflicts and disputes.

After helping us see just what viral behaviors we are capable of, James then gives us the prescription for forgiveness and healing. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." True wisdom and power is to be found, not among the greatest but among those who are near to God, among those who welcome and serve those who are last of all.

As we continue to figure out how to live faithfully during a pandemic, how to be the church when so much has changed, when we are grieving the loss of people and traditions dear to us, and even our familiar way of life together, we can still gather here to worship and pray together. There is no need to argue or engage in disputes and conflicts. There is only need of serving and loving one another. We can be welcoming, not only of children but also of new ideas and ways of being the church as we use our God given superhero power to remind the world what true greatness looks like.

And when we find ourselves anxious and arguing about worldly things, and we will, remember the collect for today. Will you pray with me?

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.