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Redefining Greatness
Mark 9: 30-37
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My freshman year of college at the University of Iowa started in the Hawkeye Marching Band. I was a trombone performance and music education major, so marching band was important. There I met another freshman trombone and music ed major named Aaron and we became fast friends. We ended up sharing an apartment, sharing recitals, and we stood up in each other's weddings.

As classes started, we had all of our auditions for various ensembles. I did fine for a freshman; I was placed in the second band, the second Jazz band, the second choir. But my friend Aaron was second chair in the top band, and he made it in to the top jazz band. He could easily do some things that I just couldn't do. He could sight read better than anyone in the studio, including a grad student who is now the principal trombone in the Air Force Band in Washington D.C. He was also extremely confident, and played his best in auditions and recitals, while I struggled with performance anxiety under pressure. Because Aaron made it into the top bands, he traveled in different social circles, he knew the grad students and upper classmen really well, and I didn't.

I loved Aaron, great guy, great friend, but the fact that he played the trombone better than I did drove me crazy. I was jealous of his abilities, of his relationships. I was afraid that others in the studio and in the school wouldn't see me as great like they saw Aaron as great, and

because of this I quietly reveled in his failures. My goal after that first week was to prove by the time that we graduated that I was a better trombonist. A few years after that first audition week, Aaron and I were both in our apartment. He was watching tv and I was trying to make my supper but our kitchen was a mound of dishes that mostly Aaron hadn't cleaned up. And I lost it. I started screaming about "your dirty dishes and don't you ever clean anything." But my tirade wasn't really about the dishes, it was about not being the greatest.

In today's story the disciples are fighting, but this fight has been building for a while. It starts at the beginning of chapter nine. For the first time, Jesus singles out three disciples, Peter, James and John, to go with him to the mountaintop for the transfiguration experience. Apparently it's been an audition for the disciples up to this point and Peter, James, and John are 1st, 2nd, and 3rd chair. They understand Jesus' message a little better, they show promise for leadership after Jesus is gone, maybe they make Jesus laugh. But think about how Andrew feels, there goes his brother, Simon, Peter, that big oaf, with Jesus. Or Matthew or Philip, they want to be close to Jesus too, they want Jesus to think they are great too.

Peter, James, and John come down the mountain after the transfiguration, but I can't imagine that any of the remaining nine are glad to see them. "We're hungry, where's supper?" "Oh, I'm sorry, we thought your little man date with Jesus was supper and a show. We didn't leave any food for you. I'm sure Jesus can whip up some loaves and fishes for you for a tasty snack."

Next a man comes to the disciples with a son that has an unclean spirit. The man asks the disciples to cast out the Spirit, and they try but they fail. It's a failure for all of the disciples, but it's a great opportunity for the nine to remind the chosen three that they aren't that great. "If I had spent an afternoon with Jesus, I would have asked him how to cast out unclean Spirits, how

about you Matthew?” “Well we’re better at healing anyway, Andrew, so I’m sure just a little more time with Jesus and we would have been able to take care of that.”

The failure continues as Jesus explains to them that he will die and rise again in three days. None of the disciples know what he’s talking about. Messiahs aren’t supposed to die. But this is another great opportunity for the nine to remind the top three that they aren’t so great. “Huh, I would think that if I was one of the chosen three, spending all of that quality time with Jesus, I would have been able to figure out what Jesus is talking about with all of the crucifixion business. Maybe you aren’t that smart after all.”

And then the disciples openly fight as they’re walking down the road. The nine are jealous, the top three are defending their medalist status and everyone is making their case for being number one and tearing their friends apart. We’ve all been in this conversation, we know what it’s like. But Jesus responds to their fighting with a line that completely turns their jostling for position on its head. Jesus responds with a line that shows us the Realm of God. Jesus shows us God’s healed world.

“Those who wish to be first of all must be last of all and servant of all,” Jesus says. The first thing this statement does is assure the disciples that they all have worth. Jesus doesn’t say that Peter, James and John are great because they understand or show leadership or because they are funny. Jesus isn’t concerned about rank. Rather, Jesus is concerned about service. Greatness is something everyone can achieve, because everyone can serve. The Realm of God is that place where everyone strives to serve. As we work to make the Realm of God visible on earth, we let go of our fear that we aren’t measuring up, and we strive to serve.

Scholar Richard Swanson translates Jesus' statement this way, "If you want to be first of all, be last of all, go wait table for everyone else." Serve, wait tables, do the simple things. This is the Christian life. This is greatness.

We don't hear this too often. I don't know that we hear this anywhere, but here: in the church, reading the Bible. This line, "you want to be first of all, be last of all, go wait tables for everyone else," is something we desperately need to hear living in this hypercompetitive time. In sports, in the arts, in school, the pressure to achieve is coming earlier and earlier. My wife Sara and I recently went on a college visit with her 17 year old brother and the pressure that he feels to keep his numbers up, GPA, class rank, ACT score, is so much more intense than just 20 years ago when we went to college. Not to mention the sense of failure and shame that he feels having numbers attached to his name that are just a little less than what he was hoping for.

I believe that we are to follow our curiosity with reckless abandon, dive into our passions, and develop our gifts and skills. We are to offer all of our God-given gifts and talents to the world. The world needs our best gifts, all of our creativity, and God deserves nothing less from us. But we also know we know we easily get a bit carried away with our efforts. We can easily get caught up in our need to prove our greatness to our peers, to measure up to our neighbors. It's so easy to be those disciples, afraid we'll be left behind, and desperate to do anything to prove that we're worth it.

But this line from Jesus, "If you want to be first of all, be last of all, servant of all, go wait table for everyone else," is one of those lines from the Bible that can save our lives and at the same time pull at everything that keeps us comfortable. We need to hear this line, but when we hear what it's actually saying, it will give us more challenge than we want.

19th century Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said this about passages like these, “The matter is quite simple. This Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, my whole life would be ruined. How would I get on in the world? Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes, it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament.”

Part of the challenge of the Christian life is to find the courage to truly see the vision of life the scriptures will show us and then to stand in the dissonance created between that vision and our world, and listen for God’s call to us there.

The most powerful book I’ve read is the book *Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* by Shane Claiborne. Readers of this book should have to sign a release form before cracking it open, “The author is not responsible for the crazy ideas and actions that come from reading this book.” Shane Claiborne is a founding member of the Simple Way community in Philadelphia, an intentional community that lives together, worships together, serves the poor together.

His story gets interesting as a college student. He and his friends are determined to find a real Christian. Someone who really listens to what Jesus says. The only people they can think of are dead, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day. And then they remember Mother Theresa. So they write her a letter to see if they can do an internship with her in Calcutta. They don’t hear anything for a while, so Shane decides to call Mother Theresa on the phone. He finds her number and places a call at two in the morning, Mother Theresa picks up, Shane Claiborne explains why he’s calling and she says, “Come.” Shane Claiborne asks,

“Where will we eat and sleep?” She says, “God takes care of the lilies and the sparrows, God will take care of you, just come.”

So he goes to Calcutta to be with Mother Theresa, and he spends most of his time in Mother Theresa’s Home for the Destitute and Dying. He writes, “I helped folks eat, massaged muscles, gave baths, and basically tried to spoil people who really deserved it. Each day, folks would die, and each day, we would go out onto the streets and bring in new people. The goal was not to keep people alive (we had very few supplies for doing that) but to allow people to die with dignity, with someone loving them, singing, laughing, so they were not alone. Sometimes folks with medical training would come by and be overwhelmed with frustration because we had so few medical supplies, and the sisters would hastily explain that our mission was not to prolong life but to help people die well. As Mother Theresa would say, “We are called not to be successful but to be faithful.”

He also shares other sayings of Mother Theresa, “We can do no great things, just small things with great love. It is not how much you do, but how much love you put into doing it.” “Do not worry about your career. Concern yourself with your vocation, and that is to be lovers of Jesus.” And, “Calcuttas are everywhere if only we have eyes to see. Find your Calcutta.”

I think this is pretty close to what Jesus is talking about when he talks about greatness. Helping the poor die with dignity and surrounded by love in Calcutta. Simple, selfless, and so sacred. And like the disciples, we’re left to sort out what this means for us in our lives. We’re used to living one way, and then a completely different way is shown to us. It’s so new and unusual that it surprises us even though we’ve heard Jesus talk about it a thousand times.

In that stunned, bewildered space, God will reach for us, and turn us, so we can see the healed world God hopes for. We won’t be asked to do it all, to get to that healed world in one

step. We'll be asked to do simple, little things. God will ask us to let go of the fear of not measuring up. God will ask us to trust that we all have beautiful gifts to offer the world. God will ask us to do simple things with great love. God will ask us how much love we can put into everything we do. God will ask us not to worry about our career, but to worry about our vocation, our baptism, sharing Christ's ministry. God will ask us to find our Calcuttas not just in our nation, but in our neighborhoods, in our relationships. And then God will ask us to serve, to wait tables, simple things. We can do that. We can be great. May it be so. Amen.