

September 20, 2009  
Lectionary 25b  
Mark 9:30-37  
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

### ***PATH TO GREATNESS***

Did you know you can get “greatness coaching?” In just two hours a month you can move from being stuck in a rut to discover your life’s purpose and greatness. You can live from your greatness with unlimited abundance, soulful relationships, and passionate creative expression.

With that path to greatness, what are we doing here? Gathering around a first century rabbi whose path led to execution on a cross? Who said the first must be last? That true greatness is found in service?

In an editorial by David Brooks this past week, he mentions the feeling of humility that many Americans felt at the end of World War II. Reflecting the gravity and solemnity of the occasion, one war correspondent wrote, “We did not win (it) because destiny created us better than all other peoples. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than we are proud.”

Quite a far cry, Brooks goes on, from the individualism today that exposes the beauty, power and the divinity within. This culture of self-exposure and self-love would lead Muhammad Ali to declare he was the greatest of all time and Norman Mailer to write a book, “Advertisements of Myself.” And one singer would grab the microphone from another at the MTV Video Music Awards to declare that the wrong person won.

Surely God wants us to make something of our lives. To do the best we can. To use our talents and abilities. And what’s wrong with a little prestige? Power? Success? Wealth? Recognition? You’d think if we followed Jesus literally we should be so humble that we delete our great accomplishments from our resumes. That we should run the other direction if we come close to having our name on a “who’s who” list. After all, death on the cross notwithstanding, Jesus is one of the most famous people of all time.

This coming Friday a new film version of the musical *Fame* will be released. The story follows a group of talented high school students in a highly competitive environment. They all are seeking success, to become a star. The question is whether they have the talent and discipline to make it. Remember the words to the title song:

*I’m gonna live forever, I’m gonna learn how to fly—Fame!*  
*I feel it comin’ together, People will see me and cry—Fame!*  
*I’m gonna make it to heaven, Light up the sky with a flame—Fame!*  
*I’m gonna live forever, Baby, remember my name!*

The path to greatness often involves superlatives. We don’t just want to be good. We want to be the best. The brightest. The smartest. The cutest. The strongest. The fastest. The wealthiest.

I remember in high school not wanting to be anything but first chair trumpet, the best. Second chair wasn’t good enough. And even though this is a church with humility considered a best practice, many of us would love to say that we have the best music, the best preaching, the best people, the best website, the best and coolest church we know.

But the pressure to embody superlatives can take its toll. Back to the musical *Fame*. One student laments, “Everybody else here is colorful or eccentric or charismatic, and I’m perfectly normal.” Since when is normal such a bad thing?

Susan Boyle was a pretty normal, if not frumpy, English woman. Remember her rise to fame last spring on a British talent show. And the sensation of her song on the internet. She said her wish was to become famous. But after a couple months of the limelight, the fame began to take an emotional toll.

In the middle of the gospel of Mark, Jesus makes clear to his disciples that his calling and his destiny will involve suffering, rejection and death. It is a conversation stopper. The disciples don’t even know what to say, or what to ask. But later Jesus hears them arguing and calls them on it. He wants to know what the topic of conversation really was. The thing is, they were arguing about fame, about who was the greatest. They were hung up on superlatives. So they look down and hang their heads in shame.

You want to know the path to greatness, Jesus tells them. It's not about being first, but last. It's about serving. And to make the point, Jesus puts a child among them. Whoever welcomes a child, welcomes me, he says.

In Jesus' day a child was a nonperson, a nobody. We have pictures and songs about Jesus blessing the little children. But in that day children would have stayed with the women and kept out of the way. It would have seemed a bit shocking to have a little child so close to a great teacher like Jesus or in the middle of a group of men.

The path to greatness? Welcome children. Welcome nobodies. Focus not on the rich and famous, but shower dignity on those left out.

Maybe it also means to welcome life with the wonder of a child. And to welcome and honor the vulnerable part of ourselves. The reality that we face illness and suffering, sorrow and grief. The fact that we will not live forever and that our youth will pass away.

At our food4thought gathering this morning, Dan McAdams will talk about the life stories that give us purpose, meaning and identity. In his book, *The Redemptive Self*, Dan talks about highly generative people, those who have accomplished great things, often making the world a better place. For many of them, their calling is connected to our country's longtime sense of being a chosen people. It's part of the Puritan Myth. Even out of great suffering or challenge, we are called to greatness, to make something of our lives. We can look at our history and see both the strengths and weaknesses of that view of American destiny.

We take in many messages about fame and greatness. Yet in this place we gather around the One whose life was marked by humility and service. The One who walked the path to suffering before joy.

Our reading from James proposes another path, the path to wisdom. Wisdom that is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

Come and receive this gift of wisdom as we gather at the Lord's Table, the greatest and the least. Come and take into your body, your heart and your life this wisdom that is the path to your calling, your identity, your joy.