

<Read text: Mark 9:30-37>.

Well this is a tad embarrassing. Jesus and his disciples arrive in Capernaum. They settle down in a room for the evening and as they're unpacking what little they have and getting ready for the evening, Jesus throws out an innocent-sounding question. **"What were you arguing about on the road?"** (v33). You can just feel the activity of the room come to a halt as the record-scratch moment hits them. The disciples exchanging sort of nervous glances. Who's going to own up to it first? And did any of them realize that Jesus already knew? He was just asking to see if they would come forward with what they had done.

Well what had they done that was so embarrassing, so terrible that none of them wanted to speak up? They were arguing about which of them was the greatest. I mean, couldn't one of them just sort of play it off as idle chatter? "Oh, we were just arguing about who was the greatest of us, silly really." No, that wasn't going to work because whether they could put it in words or not, they just knew that this was wrong what they had been doing. Of course, Jesus doesn't just leave them hanging, he takes the time to explain what was wrong with their attitude, to show them a better path.

Of course, it's not really surprising what the disciples were doing, is it? After all this idea was already inflated in the Jewish national identity. They were the people chosen of God, they were his special folks. He had been their God exclusively, guarded and guided them through history from Abraham. The fact that God chose them they took to mean there was already something special about them that God must've liked. That's not true, of course, but it didn't stop them from thinking it.

Not that the disciples really needed that push of national identity to get to this point. It's the core of the sinful nature to try to be the "greatest". Let's be honest, when we have a choice between greatest and least, without giving it any thought, we'd invariably choose "greatest". We want the best, the biggest, the strongest, the grandest and most glorious for ourselves by nature. And we ourselves have that inclination in us to be the best, the strongest, the grandest, the most-loved, best-respected, most powerful, etc, etc. We may all have our own specific definition of what it means to be "greatest", but let's not deny the allure of it. We want it.

But now here's a question: Why? Being great isn't an end unto itself, it's a means to an end. We don't want to be great just to say we're great, we want it because of the things that come with it. We see power, respect, glory, money, authority all leading to the same road in the end; the ability to do what we want. It goes back to the oldest of sins. That which kept Adam silent as his wife reached for the fruit of the tree. "You will be like God." This desire has not left our natures since then. We want to be great like God so we can be in control. So we can make our own choices, without cost or consequence.

And who wouldn't want to be great like God? There can be no question that there is no one greater, right? Absolute authority over everything and completely free of any needs. Whatever God wants, happens. Whatever he commands, it is obeyed. He has nothing he is dependent or reliant upon. Nothing controls him. Nothing stops him. Sort of ironic that the disciples were arguing about their own greatness when the greatest ever was leading them along the path that afternoon.

If we truly desire greatness, if we really want to be like God, then that's where we should look. We should look to the greatest and model him. So look at Jesus here, travelling along that Galilean path to Capernaum. What do you see in the greatest there ever was and is? Here is the God of creation. He can do what he pleases and everyone and everything that exists owes him everything. So why is he hiding from the crowds who want to adore him? Why is he dressed so plainly? Why is he *walking*? He should be riding a mighty beast or maybe just floating along! Where are his servants? His attendants? And that's not all. Listen to what he's saying as he walks along. He is going to allow himself to be betrayed, handed over to those who hate him and he is going to be killed?

The one and true God. The only one with complete self-determination and authority. This is what he chooses to do with his greatness? He chooses to hide it, put it aside and lower himself to the absolute depths of what human existence is capable of? Hiding and homeless? Executed as a criminal? Shamed and alone? It boggles the mind. I have a feeling that if any of us were to sit down and write out a list of what we would do if we could do absolutely anything...none of these things would make the list. God the greatest chose to become the least.

Again the question is begged; why? Why would the one who had everything, who needs nothing, who can do anything; why would he become nothing and give up everything to go to this one destination of death? In short, for you. While you were busy chasing your own glory and greatness on a path that led to death, God gave up his greatness to save you. And you needed saving. You see, every time you chased your own greatness, in no matter how small a way, you were rejecting

God in favor of yourself. Each time you look to build yourself up you were saying that God is not good enough for you, you need to be in his place. Your chasing greatness rejects him and for that you deserve to be rejected by God. There was only one hope for you. While you were seeking your own glory God gave up his own, hung rejected by his own Father in your place.

Can you imagine how sheepish and foolish the disciples must've felt when confronted by Jesus, if they took the time to consider the whole day in perspective? Jesus was trying to teach them that he would die for them. At the very least on a personal level their friend was saying he would be tortured and executed. But instead of a drop of sympathy they return to the age-old habit of seeking that personal glory. Jesus' patience is divine. Any one of us would've blown our stacks or at the very least given them a good reprimand under such treatment. Jesus in love continues to try to lead his disciples somewhere better. He tries to teach them what it means to truly be great. Not to seek your own greatness, not to use the power and authority you have in order to gain for yourself, but to be like him. To take all that you have and use it to benefit someone else.

And our perception of reality is turned entirely on its head. Here is Jesus, the greatest, telling us that in order to be great, we must make ourselves the least. We must care for those who cannot pay us back. We must be willing to give everything and get nothing so that someone else might gain by it. And not just gain in any old way, but gain in ways that truly matter, ways that truly benefit. Jesus gave himself entirely that you might live forever. What are we willing to give up that someone else might know that truth and receive the same?

Here is where we see that we are not so great as we imagine ourselves to be. In fact, our entire pursuit of greatness in our lives becomes our shame. Here we see that in our pursuit of greatness it's not so much that we want to be like God, we just want to be in his place. We wanted to call the shots and be in charge. But looking at what God has done and thinking on what we would have done...can you imagine what a disaster it would be if you were a god? What selfish decisions and wants did you have in mind to pursue? How would you have abused that power and authority? And how would the rest of us have fared under your rule?

Consider what happens to those here on earth who gain the kind of greatness we think we ought to pursue. Those who through fame and wealth and power can have their every earthly wish granted. How many can you name that lived happily ever after? How many reached that nirvana of peace that we imagine lies at the end of that road? Now how many can you think of that self-destructed on that path of selfishness? And yet in our arrogance, in our pride, we imagine that if it was just *me* who had that kind of power and authority, *I* would be able to handle it.

No, when we compare ourselves to real greatness, to the one with perfect authority and how he used it, we have to admit that we are the least. No matter how hard we struggle we continually fail. We've been chasing the wrong ends to our own destruction. To be truly great is to model Jesus, who made himself nothing for our sake. We have sought false greatness, and for that we are less than nothing.

That's a good attitude to start with. Recognize your failure to be great like God. Recognize and admit that you have tried over and over again to replace him in your life with other things and people you trust in. Recognize that you have continually sought comfort in your own power and strength instead of his. Admit that you are the least before God, that you have done nothing good and that you have nothing to offer him. And God will lift you up in his power and make you the greatest.

Jesus made himself the least so that you could be great. Not great as we think of it, but great as God rightly understands it. In Jesus your faults are removed, your idolatry is paid for. By the Holy Spirit you have been granted a heart that holds the Lord as your God. You are, in his eyes, exactly what he is looking for. When you admit you have nothing good in you and hold purely to Jesus as your hope of rescue, God looks at you and sees true greatness.

And that greatness pours out in God-like evidence in our lives. By the power of the Spirit, by faith in the Lord, knowing who and what we are to our God, we can truly be great like God. Not great by being a God, but great like he is. We can willingly be the least to all. We can humble ourselves for the sake of others. We can stop chasing personal glory because our greatness is already complete in the Lord. Pride and shame have no effect on us because our pride is found not in ourselves anymore but in the Lord. And there it is perfect and unchanging. We cannot be put to shame in that. Whatever you might have to give is irrelevant. Whatever you might have to bite your tongue on doesn't matter. Washed clean by the Spirit, make anew in the Lord, you can truly be great like God. You can be the least of all that you might be the greatest of all. Amen.