

Who is Great?
Mark 9:33-37

They just keep getting bad press.

In our stories the disciples either misinterpret what Jesus is trying to teach, or sanctimoniously try to push someone away, or run off in fear for their lives.

In today’s reading we catch them in the act of one-upping each other, arguing over who is greatest among them. One writer describes them as

“graduate students comparing GRE scores...

[as] ministers discussing [how many people attend] worship each week....

[as] anyone who has ever written a memo containing the words ‘measurable outcomes’.

Which of the disciples is the star pupil? Who is the greatest?”¹

How can they tell? By what standard are they assessing themselves?

It’s clear from the story that the disciples feel caught.

They don’t respond to Jesus’ inquiries about their argument, but seem a little embarrassed.

Among themselves it’s okay to measure and exult in ego – but not with the teacher present.

And like a good teacher, knowing what’s been going on in the back of the class, Jesus takes over. He sits down and gathers his pupils, the proper form for a lecture, which lets his followers know: here it comes.

We’ve all been caught in such moments when we’re not acting out of our best selves.

We allow ourselves to recognize such behavior most often in children, which makes this story a bit amusing to me. “*Mom loves me more – does not – does too – does not!*”

Doesn’t it seem the disciples are *already* acting like children when Jesus begins his lesson?

Those are children of our day – not his.

The teaching begins:

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all”. But those are just words. So he searches for a concrete example, one that would drive it home for his time and place.

He sees a child, perhaps serving them some food:

a non-entity, invisible to this crowd of men.

And he pulls the *unnamed*,

un-gendered

un-person into their midst, deliberately shocking and confusing them:

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me”.

Most of us have heard these or similar words many times. It’s a familiar phrase in our Christian culture, and so it’s not shocking to us in the way it would have been to the twelve.

In the present we seem to like this verse, perhaps because we have a romanticized view of the innocence inherent in childhood – and possibly that view was inspired by these very passages.

But in the time of this story, children were less than human.

They were invisible.

With that understanding hear the words again:

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name,
welcomes me,
and whoever welcomes me
welcomes not me
but the one who sent me”.

To state that a *child* could be a stand in for Jesus, for their *teacher* – who himself was a stand in for their *God* – was inconceivable to the disciples. *How could they measure greatness now?*

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This theme of welcoming the invisible runs throughout the Gospel teachings of Jesus.

When you visited the sick or imprisoned you visited me.

The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Blessed are the poor, the meek, the persecuted, for they will be rewarded.

Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me,

and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me

but the one who sent me.

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The disciples chose to apprentice themselves to this teacher.

His teachings would be *their* work.

They were determined to follow Jesus’ ways, and yet,

like many, they got caught up in this need to excel,

to be the best, to be seen as the greatest.

How were they measuring themselves, I wonder?

Against the one to whom they were apprenticed?

They certainly didn’t want to be taught by,

apprenticed to,

compared with

a nobody - a ***child!***

But this is who Jesus points to as a stand in for him,

for the teacher,

for the divine.

This was the measure to be taken.

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Who do *we* apprentice ourselves to?

Whose guidance are we following,

learning from,

striving to emulate?

What is our yardstick to measure our success?

And who do we view as our stand in for Jesus today?

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I was sitting in one of my regular coffee shops this week meditating on today’s theme,

and I noticed a young man about college age, speaking with one who seemed to take the role of mentor.

I could hear the older man sharing insights about life, about how to live as a Christian;

and then I heard him say quite seriously,

“Right now it seems you may just get into heaven.

Perhaps just inside the door...just inside the door”.

Who is great? And who decides? Where does this mentor find his measuring stick for his view of salvation?
And what made the young man apprentice himself to this particular teacher?

What makes *us* choose *our* guides?
How do we judge our own success and greatness?
There are many tools for self-assessment out there –
 our culture’s standards ...
 our family’s values ...
 our faith’s orthodoxies.

Who is the greatest depends on who or what we apprentice ourselves to.
 And who we choose to apprentice ourselves to will determine who we view as greatest.
We may wish to emulate the Dalai Lama’s spiritual greatness,
 the Crocodile Hunter’s passion for wildlife greatness,
 William Sloane Coffin’s preaching greatness or
 Donald Trump’s business greatness.
All have different meaning and different amount of pull for each of our striving.
Who are we measuring ourselves against?

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Perhaps, like Jesus’ disciples, you perceive these as mere words. How do we make them concrete for our time and place?

This past Thursday I read Sara Hoffman’s weekly Community editorial in the Coloradoan. Her article, entitled “God won’t take sides in election”, referred to Jimmy Carter’s book *Our Endangered Values* by noting,  
    “Carter says believers of any religion who see themselves as totally aligned with God tend to think they are superior [*who is greatest?*]. Initially, they view people who disagree with them as ‘inherently wrong.’ Eventually, they see them as ‘inherently inferior,’ and ultimately, as ‘subhuman.’ In other words, their lives are not significant”.<sup>2</sup>

Yet today’s reading counters our tendency to dehumanize: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name; whoever welcomes in my name the invisible and those deemed unimportant and the ones you revile ...”.

*Is Jesus suggesting we be apprenticed to these? Are these his chosen stand ins?*

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I would also note that there is a reversed side to this question:
 the side of those who view themselves as the invisible
 (which could be a number of us at various points in our lives).

This is a side on which we must also take care, as another editorial this week cautioned.

 In his column on spirituality, Norris Burke reminded readers that sometimes our suffering, which many Christians interpret as redeeming, may in fact be “all about our personal pride or sanctimony”³.

In other words, even if we feel like the invisible child in Jesus’ teaching, we cannot *always* claim that role. If we profess *only* the frustrations of being a forgotten one, then we will also be in danger of forgetting, of not seeing others around us.

...Because there are always others.

At Plymouth we work hard on our covenant to be Open and Affirming to all people who wish to worship among us, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks,
 those who live with mobility, hearing or visual abilities different from the majority,
 the very young and our elders,
 and others who have traditionally been passed over by the mainstream.
 Who are the invisible ones today
 who we continue to miss because we've
 simply not noticed them before?

Our congregation has chosen to apprentice ourselves to an Open and Affirming practice because we experience Jesus' teachings coming to life in and through the welcoming of all people. But to be truly welcoming of all, this must be the ministry of all.

One of the benefits of being in a community of diverse thinkers is that we may check in with one another and hold each other accountable in our striving – we can lovingly ask:
 “by what standard are we measuring ourselves in our struggle for justice?
 In working for God's world?
 What are we missing?
 And where are we feeling too satisfied with our successes?”

Here in this particular community we are accountable to one another in always seeking to follow Jesus' teachings. At Plymouth you are not apprenticing yourselves to me or to Hal or to any other clergy person who's ever been or will be here.

Each of us is apprenticed to *this world and its needs*,
 and through apprenticing ourselves to these
 as taught in the Gospel stories
 we apprentice ourselves to the Great,
 to the God of all creation.

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This is all to say what Jesus taught in 2 sentences,  
 as he sat down and  
 gathered his disciples around him saying:  
 “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.  
 Whoever welcomes one such child in my name  
 welcomes me,  
 and whoever welcomes me  
 welcomes not me  
 but the one who sent me”.

This is great.  
 Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Hinkle Shore, “Seeing Things”, *The Christian Century Magazine*,  
<http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=1725>.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Hoffman, “God won’t takes (*sic*) sides in election”, *Fort Collins Coloradoan*, Sept. 22, 2006, p. A?.

<sup>3</sup> Norris Burke, “Those who righteously suffer get a blessing”, *Fort Collins Coloradoan*, Sept. 22, 2006, p. D6.