

Sermon: Striving for Greatness
Text: Mark 9:30 – 37
Date: September 20, 2009 AM
Place: Jesup First UMC

They say auto racing is the fastest growing sport in America. Now, I've never really understood how thousands and thousands of people can sit for hours and watch cars go around in circles. I need a little more than that. Like the 1979 Daytona 500. Remember that race? Donnie Allison was leading and Cale Yarbrough tried to pass on the inside. Well, Allison cut him off and drove him onto the grass, but Cale recovered and pushed Allison into the wall and both cars crashed and slid into the infield grass. Now, the real action begins. Yarbrough and Allison got out of their cars and Allison's brother, Bobby, joined them and right there in front of God and everybody, they started throwing fists and helmets. Meanwhile, Richard Petty won the race and they missed it all!

The Bible tells us how Jesus and the disciples traveled throughout Galilee and as they walked along, Jesus taught them and the conversation turned more and more toward His upcoming death. Now, one day, as they walked along, two of the disciples – James and John, began arguing among themselves. And the interesting thing is that while they were arguing, they totally missed Jesus' teaching. Jesus had said: *"The Son of Man didn't come to be served but to serve and to lay down His life as a ransom for many,"* but they missed it. Jesus talked about laying down His life and they were looking to make a name for themselves.

And their argument must have gotten pretty heated because when they stopped in Capernaum,

Jesus asked what they were arguing about. And Mark says: *“They were silent, for on the way they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest.”* And so, when they got home, He called them together and said: *“If you want to be first, you must be last and serve others.”* And then, He took a child and said: *“If you welcome a little child, you welcome me and the One who sent me.”*

Now, friends, everybody wants to be number one. In sports, we want our team to be the champs. In politics, we want our favorite candidate to win. It’s important to us that our children strive for greatness in academics and in every area of their lives. But here’s the question we are left to ponder this morning: what is greatness? What does it look like? And how do we achieve it? Because, in the end, how we define greatness and how we measure it will determine our understanding of success. And the truth is: there is a big difference between how the world defines greatness and how the church defines greatness.

The world defines greatness by power. In the opening days of the Iraq War, the United States set out to demonstrate its military power by bombing Baghdad into the Stone Age. Remember Shock and Awe?! In this world, if you have power, you’re great!

The world defines greatness by prestige. Last spring, our girls had a great time playing softball at the Rec. Department and both of their teams played in the championship game. Rachel’s team came in second place and Charlotte’s team won first and both of them have trophies. And once they got their trophies, you’ll

never guess what they started chanting: “*We’re number one. We’re number one.*” We all have our “trophies,” don’t we? Sometimes they’re certificates and sometimes other mementos, but they are all accolades that help us measure our success.

The world measures greatness by position. Very few of us want to play second fiddle. We want to be top dog. We don’t want to be the city’s garbage man; we want to be the city’s mayor. We want position.

The world measures greatness by possessions. We like to build bigger barns, to own nicer cars, to have growing bank accounts. And many in our culture see these possessions as indicative of greatness.

This is how our culture measures greatness: power, prestige, position, and possessions. But it might surprise you to know that Jesus has a totally different way of defining greatness. Jesus doesn’t look at what you have or what you do. He doesn’t care who you are or where you are in life. Greatness in the Kingdom of God is measured by what you give, not by what you get, by the motivation of your actions and the object of your actions, not the results of your actions.

You see, according to scripture, God measures greatness by three standards:

First, how much am I sacrificing? In verse 31, Jesus talks about His upcoming death; He said: **“The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill Him.”** But we know that nobody took His life from Him; He willingly laid it down. In John 10, Jesus said: **“No one takes my life from me, I willingly lay**

it down.” And in I John 2, John tells us: **“If we sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous; and He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”**

And the challenge for us is: He has called us to follow Him, to live as He lived and die as He died. He said: **“If anyone would follow me, let him first deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.”** And so, Paul wrote to the church at Galatia: **“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live.”**

In February 1943, the SS Dorchester was cruising through the North Atlantic with 903 soldiers and 4 chaplains on board when a German torpedo ripped through the hull of the ship. Everybody scrambled for their life jackets. And after a while, a soldier came up to one of the chaplains and said: “I’ve lost my life jacket.” And the chaplain took his off and gave it to him. A few minutes later, another soldier came and a second chaplain did the same thing. One by one each of the chaplains gave up their life jackets that night. And then, they stood on the deck together, joined their arms and lifted their voices in prayer as the ship went down.

Jesus said: **“Greater love has no one than this than to lay down his life for a friend.”** How strange that in a world obsessed with what you have and what you get, Jesus measures greatness by how much of ourselves and how much of our resources we sacrifice for others.

Second, how much am I serving? Verse 35 says: **“Whoever wants to be first must be last and the servant of all.”** And the model servant was standing

right in front of them. The Gospels tell us about that night in the Upper Room when Jesus got up from the table and took a towel and wrapped it around His waist and went from disciple to disciple washing their feet. And Paul tells the church at Philippi: Jesus “*emptied Himself and took the form of a servant.*” And Paul says: “*Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.*”

But that’s really tough, isn’t it? Especially because it goes against everything our culture tells us about greatness. Our culture says greatness comes from being served. When I served Salem UMC in Kentucky, one of my members was the House Manager for the richest man in Kentucky. This man owned a house not too far from the church and there were 25 people working at his house. And the whole community respected him, not because of what he contributed to the community, but because of what he had and all the people that worked for him.

How strange that in a world obsessed with being served and being made comfortable, Jesus measures greatness by how much we serve others, by what we do to make life easier and more live-able for others.

Third, how selfless am I? Verse 37 says: “*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the One who sent me too.*” It’s interesting that the Aramaic word for “child” and “servant” are the same word. Now, that tells us a lot because in that culture, children were property. Children were ignored; they were kept in their place away from the adults.

But Jesus was different. He welcomed children. And He said: **“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like a child, you will never enter the Kingdom of God. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.”**ⁱ So, when Jesus says **“welcome this child”** He seems to be saying more than “accept this child”. He seems to be saying that we are to accept the nature of a child, humble yourself, give up yourself.

How strange that in a world obsessed with “me” Jesus measures greatness by how humble we are and how we put others and their needs before ourselves and our own needs.

Sacrifice; Service, and Selflessness: this is the measure of greatness.

You know, these verses speak to us as individuals and they speak to us as a church, living in our community. We want to be great for Jesus and we want our church to be great for the Kingdom. But we have to be careful how we measure greatness. Mother Teresa was quoted as saying: *“We can do no great things; only small things with great love.”* And truly is love for God and love for others is our motivation then we will be great Christians attending a great church.

Where are you sacrificing? How are you serving? Where are you demonstrating selflessness?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

ⁱ Mt. 18:3 – 4