

Chris Murphy

October 24th, 2021

Scripture: Mark 9: 33-37 NRSV

Sermon Title: How to be Truly Great

Prayer...

Introduction-

Last Sunday I preached on Matthew 25, where Jesus talks about how a shepherd separates sheep from the goats. The point of the passage is Jesus' call for us to care for people on the margins, so I did not highlight much about the use of the illustration of sheep and goats.

But today I do wish to talk about the word goat, but not in the usual way. Have you ever heard the word goat applied to sports? When you say someone from a sport is a goat. You mean that they are the greatest of all time. Get it. The acronym for goat is greatest of all time.

For example, many people believe that Tom Brady, the current NFL quarterback for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers is the GOAT or greatest of all time NFL quarterback because he has won 7 Super Bowls. We saw

this in the Olympics when Simone Biles was mentioned as the GOAT or greatest of all time among female gymnasts and Alyson Felix was talked about as the goat of female track and field stars. The same is true of Lindsay Vonn- the GOAT or greatest of all time among female downhill skiers.

You get the idea. It is a funny term, but it fits with today's passage because in our Scripture today, Jesus talks about what it takes to be the greatest. In this case, Jesus is not talking about being a great athlete, he is teaching his disciples what it means to be a great person.

The context is that the disciples are arguing about being the greatest. Jesus sits the disciples down kind of like a dad or mom might sit their kids down to teach them a lesson. Jesus's shares wise words, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then to provide a practical example of what he means, Jesus takes a little child among the disciples and taking the child in his arms says to the disciples. "Whoever welcome one such child in my name welcomes me and

whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Jesus says if you welcome a child you welcome him and you welcome God.

Okay, this is profound. Last week we talked about Jesus identifying with the vulnerable and marginalized. Today, we continue in this theme by highlighting that Jesus identifies with a child and says that God does to.

In essence, Jesus says if you want to be great, be a servant of all and to demonstrate this Jesus says we are to welcome children as if you are welcoming God.

Wow! Is that not beautiful?

What are the implications of this teaching in our lives?

First of all, greatness according to God is not only about achievement or success. No, greatness is defined by Jesus as being one who serves everyone. We could talk about that for awhile. Are we willing to be a servant of all? Are we willing to serve even those we struggle to love or value? Does all really mean all? Is the church open to all or only those

who look like me, dress like me, have as much money as me, believe like me, think like me? Do we welcome all, even the most vulnerable and less valued in our society? Mmmm... I hope so.

How about children? Do we value them? Jesus sure does. It makes me want to cry with gratitude when I think of Jesus teaching these disciples a lesson by putting a child before them and then in essence giving this child a warm hug and telling the disciples to welcome children with love.

My image of Jesus is as the most nurturing dad you know. Someone who is affectionate, kind, safe, caring, and fun. In the first century, during the days of Jesus, children were not always cared for in this way. Sometimes they were viewed as second class citizens, similar to how women were ignored or treated poorly. Not Jesus, he teaches his disciples to love kids and to show respect and appreciation to women.

Some of you know that before I came to Newberg First Presbyterian Church I was a youth pastor. I was kind of an old youth pastor. I expected to be a youth pastor when I was in my 20's, but during my 20's I worked mostly with college students. In my 30's I worked with graduate students of all ages. My seminary students were mostly in their 20's and 30's but some were in their 40's, 50's, 60's, and even 70's. But when we moved to Oregon, I became a youth pastor at the age of 43. To become a youth pastor felt a little odd for me. To be honest, I thought that a youth pastor ideally should be younger. Well, God had a different idea. I became a youth pastor in Portland and I was also the supervisor for a wonderful Children's Minister named Melissa. Together we made sure that the children, youth, and young adults all were ministered to in various ways.

We did camp retreats, Harvest Festival activities-including of all things a mini haunted house, we did youth group all nighters and week long mission trips to Alaska and North Carolina.

I grew to enjoy being a youth pastor even though to be honest at first I thought it was beneath me and more suitable for a younger pastor, certainly not someone in his 40's. What I realized over time is that I was called to be a youth pastor partly so God could show me that the most important priority of churches today involves raising up the next generation of the church.

It is probably not a surprise to you that statistics show that a large percentage of young people who grow up in church, leave church after high school. Many never return, sometimes for good reason, like for example that a church does not adapt to meet the changing needs of the next generation.

There is an idea that churches must stay the same in order to hold onto tradition, but what I am learning is that churches must hold onto some traditions, but also adapt to stay supportive of the next generation.

As the Youth Pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church, I learned that my calling was to help that church grow younger and to remind them to prioritize children, youth, young adults, and young families.

Here at Newberg First Presbyterian Church our goal is also to grow younger. We care for all people of all ages, but we have a special vision for raising up the next generation of children, youth, and young adults to know and love Jesus Christ.

Our passage today, suggests we are on the right track. If we wish to be great, we will care for children. We will focus on the next generation.

This is why it is so wonderful to once again see our Children's Ministry blossom thanks to a team of faithful volunteers here. We will continue to lift children up as a priority as we move forward as a church.

I know many of you in this room either currently have professions that focus on children, youth, or young adults or retired from jobs that focus on this age group. If this is you, would you raise your hand? You all

understand what I am talking about. I want to thank you for caring for kids and making them a priority in your vocation. You show us what it means to be a servant to young people.

The disciples in Jesus' story, want to be great but they are motivated by pride. The irony in the story is that greatness according to Jesus is seen by being humble and not seeking to be seen as better than others.

Greatness is shown by caring for vulnerable people, like children, who may or may not be able to boost your ego. Actually, being a youth pastor humbled me more times than I can say.

Now that I am a lead pastor or solo pastor here at Newberg First Presbyterian, I feel a little more like my age reflects my pastoral position, but too be honest I want to hold onto what I learned from being a youth pastor. Some of you mention from time to time that I still act like a youth pastor. Hopefully, I am maturing in my style as a pastor here and can relate to all ages, but I am also okay with having a youthful presence. Now that I am entering my 50's I plan to mature as a

pastor, but I hope you always see my youth pastor/college pastor heart. I think God has called me to stay young at heart and to encourage all of us to do the same.

On a personal note, as a dad to two girls I am thrilled that our church wants to grow younger. I hope that this church continues to adapt over time, so that we can be a welcoming place for every generation and so that we can thrive for years to come.

I have a story that I think highlights well the importance of caring for the next generation. It is a story told by Desmond Tutu, the well known former Archbishop of Capetown South Africa who was a key anti-apartheid activist and the Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

"Asked by the BBC to identify the defining moment in his life Desmond Tutu spoke of the day he and his mother were walking down the street. Tutu was nine years old. A tall white man dressed in a black suit came towards them. In the days of apartheid in South Africa, when a black

person and a white person met while walking on a footpath, the black person was expected to step into the gutter to allow the white person to pass and nod their head as a gesture of respect. But this day, before a young Tutu and his mother could step off the sidewalk the white man stepped off the sidewalk and, as they passed, he tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her!

The white man was Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest who was bitterly opposed to apartheid. It changed Tutu's life. When his mother told him that Trevor Huddleston had stepped off the sidewalk because he was a "man of God," Tutu found his calling. "When she told me that he was an Anglican priest I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God" said Tutu.

Huddleston later became a mentor to Desmond Tutu and his commitment to the equality of all human beings due to their creation in God's image a key driver in Tutu's opposition to apartheid."

My prayer on this Friday is that we can all strive to be "people of God" who are willing to "step off the sidewalk" and "tip our hat" to our sisters and brothers, particularly those on the margins. May it be so...

Isn't that a great story that reminds us what it means to be a great person who cares for young people and is a servant of all.

By the way, I think GOAT- Greatest of all time probably refers to Jesus.

After all, Jesus is usually the answer to most Sunday school questions.

Although Jesus may be the greatest human of all time, I am not sure he needs his ego stroked. If in our worship, we tell Jesus he is great, he will probably remind us that we are loved and that greatness is shown in serving all and especially in remembering vulnerable children in our midst.

Will you pray with me?...