

Text: Mark 9:30-37 (CSB)

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost.

September 23, 2018.

In God's eyes, you are all the greatest. Amen.

"I am the greatest!" That was the statement of boxer Muhammad Ali. And at the time he said them, he was the greatest boxer in the world. Some would say he was the greatest boxer of all time. But what made him the greatest? His own declaration? How did he get to be the greatest? Working hard?

Training more? Who gets to say who is the greatest?

I think we could agree there's a little Muhammad Ali in each one of us. Who wouldn't like to be the greatest at school and get the best GPA? Who would like to be the greatest at work and make the most money? Who wouldn't like to be the greatest and just have everyone show you respect? But again, who gets to say who is the greatest?

Most importantly, wouldn't we agree that Jesus' declaration of who is the greatest really makes that person the greatest? Wouldn't Jesus showing us who is the greatest make that person the greatest? Wouldn't the repeated teaching and telling of Jesus truly reveal to us, "Who is the greatest?" Who is the greatest? Let's not listen to Muhammad Ali, or even our own hearts. Let's have Jesus answer the question, "Who is the greatest?"

Jesus had this greatest conversation more than once. He was teaching. He was telling. He was doing this over and over and over and over. This was some hard stuff. The Son of Man, that's Jesus, is being betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after he is killed, he will rise three days later. Man. There's some challenging stuff. Our great teacher, our great leader, betrayed? Now, Jesus was teaching them and telling them this same thing over and over. This was not the first time Jesus talked about his suffering and death. But it was the first time Jesus used the word, "Betrayed." Would it be someone close to Jesus? Would it be one of these twelve men in this group? And look. He is being betrayed. This is already in process and it will happen soon. And then there's all this killing. They will kill him and after he is killed. Why say it twice? Who could believe it? Killed? The teacher preaching peace and love and turning the other cheek? Killed? How can that be? What are you talking about?

Jesus is teaching two things. One, the bad news, good news contrast. Yes, there was bad news for the Christ. He had to suffer, be betrayed by one of his closest friends. Yes, he had to be killed in the most gruesome way possible. But, but, but, there is good news. He will rise. He will live. He will win. All who believe in him will rise and live and win. And just as there is bad news, good news for the Christ, there will be bad news, good news for the Christian, the one who believes in and follows Christ. There will be plenty of bad news on this earth: sickness way too young, sadness that seems so unfair, so much bad stuff happening to good people. But ultimately there is good news for the Christian. You will rise as Christ rose. You will live as Christ lives. First the bad news, then the good news.

The second thing Jesus is telling and teaching, look at how Jesus is the greatest: by suffering, by serving. Jesus didn't bang his chest and yell at reporters, "I am the greatest!" Jesus' greatness was found in his suffering, that took away the sins of the world. Jesus' greatness was found in serving others, treating himself like the least so others could be great. Yes, death was the way to greatness for Jesus. Suffering and dying for others was the way for Jesus to be great.

Now, the disciples did not understand this statement. Who could? Jesus betrayed? Who would do that? Why hand over our teacher, our leader? Jesus killed? How could that possibly happen? What would

anyone have against Jesus? And they were so confused and so in the dark when they heard betrayed and killed they couldn't even hear the part about rising. Rising? What does he mean? Rising from the dead? What could that be? Who rises from the dead? No one has ever done that! That can't be! They did not understand this statement. And who can blame them?

And then even worse, they were afraid to ask him. These two verbs, did not understand and were afraid are two more of those doing this over and over again words. They continued being ignorant and they continued being afraid. Can't we see how those go together? When you are ignorant and don't understand, you are afraid to ask. Maybe I'll sound foolish. Maybe this makes sense to everyone else. I don't even know where to start with this statement. And then when you are afraid to ask, you stay ignorant. You don't understand. Here was the perfect teacher and they didn't ask. Here was Jesus, the perfectly patient one, and they were afraid to ask and didn't ask.

Why? Well, Jesus has just predicted he's going to be killed. Killed. Do you really want to ask and know more details? Maybe you are fine stopping with the bad news you already know. Ask more and it might just get worse. Another reason. On a previous occasion, Jesus had made this same prediction, minus the betraying part. After that, Peter, one of these close friends of Jesus, pulled Jesus aside and said, "Never, Jesus, this will never happen to you!" You know what Jesus said, and of course, rightly so? "Get behind me Satan!" Probably the harshest, yet truest rebuke ever spoken. Anything that gets in the way of Jesus going to cross is from Satan. The disciples probably remembered that rebuke and possibly didn't want to say anything to put themselves in that situation again. Maybe each person was afraid to look stupid by asking a question and then, he would not be the greatest anymore.

So the disciples shifted from the confusing topic of Jesus' death and resurrection and returned to a more familiar topic: who is the greatest? Maybe they thought they had kept it quiet, a secret from Jesus. That makes sense, trying to keep a secret from Jesus. But Jesus knew they argued. And his question was a shot to the heart. And the disciples were to blame. "What were you arguing about on the way?" They were silent. Over and over. They said nothing. They didn't move a muscle. They were paralyzed by guilt. First, they were ashamed of their ignorance. Now they are ashamed of their pride.

And now we can really relate. Suffering? For a Christian? That's not right. That can't be. Good things are supposed to happen to good people. Not cancer. Not knee surgery. Jesus, don't tell me about suffering and dying. Have you felt the paralyzing effect of guilt? The bell rang. You wanted to be first to the playground. You ran so fast out the door you didn't realize it slammed behind you. Right on a classmate's finger. Now being first doesn't seem so important. You pushed for that raise. Wanted that money. Maybe cut a few corners. Talked down some coworkers, just a little bit. Then you wonder why they won't talk to you. Or maybe you don't have to wonder. What I had to do, what I had to achieve, what I had to get done, that was most important. Who is the greatest? Yeah, sinful people like us can relate with those sinful disciples.

That's why Jesus was teaching and was telling and sat down and called his friends. To not only tell, but to show. The one who wants to be first, will be last of all, servant of all. Now, let's hold off on thinking, "Jesus is setting a good example and we should do like Jesus did." Yes, he means that, but there's something much more important. Much more important. Jesus' main job was not to be our example. Jesus' main job was to be our Substitute. Jesus did what we couldn't. He lived a perfect life. Perfect! Holy! When you see Jesus as only your example, that perfection will paralyze you with more guilt. I can't live up to that! But when you see Jesus as your Substitute, that perfection is a great gift. I am perfect

because Jesus was perfect. I am holy because Jesus was holy. I am great in the eyes of God because Jesus did what I couldn't. And Jesus did what I wouldn't. Made himself last of all and servant of all. He served us with a perfect life and an innocent death, death on a cross. Jesus let himself be betrayed so you won't be betrayed. Jesus let himself be killed so you will live forever. Jesus died so you will live. And here's the best news, because Jesus rose, you will rise. Pretty cool, huh? We don't have to endure the bad news Jesus endured, but we get to enjoy the good news he enjoyed!

But now that we have seen Jesus' main job: our Substitute, did what we couldn't and did what we wouldn't, then we can see Jesus setting the perfect example in answering the question, "Who is the greatest?" The one who is last of all and servant of all. Jesus served all. Jesus washed feet when no one else would. Jesus lived his whole life for the benefit of others, not himself. You know, when we examine Jesus' statement here and see how he lived it out, there's really some cool thoughts that turn life upside down. In Christ's kingdom everyone can be first. Now, in any competition there can only be one first. And I'll argue with you that there really can't be a tie, but the tie goes to the runner. But in Christ's kingdom, everyone can be first. In fact, in Christ's kingdom everyone wants to be first. Did you catch that? If anyone wants to be first. In Christ's kingdom everyone wants to be first, but the way to do that is by being last of all, servant of all. Rank and status are important in many cultures, but not in the Christian culture. The one who is first is last of all. And we can all be first when we think like Jesus thought. When we answer the question, "Who is the greatest?" in this way, "The one who is least, last, the servant of all. That one is the greatest."

Then Jesus used a visual aid, like we often do in the children's message. Only this time the children's message wasn't for children. The child was the message. The child was the visual aid. In a stunning and visual and memorable way, Jesus has the child stand among them. Jesus takes the child in his arms. Do you see what Jesus is showing and telling? This child is helpless. That's how you have to see yourself. This child is humble. That's how you need to be. This child depends on others. You need to see that you depend on me. The word for child indicates someone who needs training and discipline. We need constant training to see who is the greatest, the last of all and servant of all. We need to welcome children, those who can't help our status or advance our careers or give us money. We welcome children in Jesus' name, because of everything we know about Jesus. We welcome children to be humble as children are. We welcome children because that's welcoming Jesus. It's welcoming God. We welcome children because we don't answer the question, "Who is the greatest?" in the worldly way. The greatest is the one with the best grades, the most money, the most toys. The greatest is the one who makes himself last, who serves all, who welcomes children. The greatest in the eyes of God is the one who makes herself the least in the eyes of the world. Amen.

God is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or even imagine, according to his great power that is at work within us. Amen.