Sunday September 19th, 2021

Mark 9: 30-37

Time and again I am reminded when I read the scriptures that the people of Jesus’ time were no different than you and me today. We need to hear things over and over again, from different perspectives, and still there are times when we still don’t get it. Jesus is trying to teach his first followers about how things are and what is coming down the pipe for him and them. No matter how many times he repeats the mission, and today tells them he’s going to suffer, die and then rise again, it doesn’t quite sink in.

It’s human nature to ignore or gloss over the things we don’t want to know or hear. Even though Peter has acknowledged Jesus as Messiah when he answered the question ‘who do you say I am?’, he still doesn’t see that the picture of the Messiah he has is not the Messiah Jesus has come to be. Instead of a warrior sent from God to deliver God’s people from oppression with power and a sharp sword, who Jesus is in reality is the human servant, come to make God’s Kingdom a reality in their time. Millenia of looking and hoping for a conqueror has not opened their eyes to God’s plan.

It’s interesting to imagine the disciples walking along, just out of earshot of Jesus…or so they think…wondering who is going to be the ‘greatest.’ It made me think of Muhammad Ali assuring the world he was the greatest. The achievement of greatness…being #1…was a worldly view of a greatness achieved with might and power…the toughest person with the biggest stick claimed the prize. The winner takes the power, and claims the prestige. Yet the disciples were slowly learning that Jesus as God’s chosen one was heading in the opposite direction. Jesus was headed down to where the everyday people…like the place his disciples and you and I live…a place where humility, service and suffering were the order of the day.

For those students of history, greatness cannot be defined solely by power, prestige, accomplishment and upward mobility. Some of the greatest people in history were folks like the simple fishermen who followed Jesus…and people like you and me. The world’s view of greatness is opposite to God’s view of greatness. Instead of a decked-out warrior, God comes down to meet us in the man who started out in dubious circumstances, and grew to be the One who would love, forgive and die to show us the plans God has for us, in this life and the next.

I ask you to consider someone who, in your life, has earned the adjective great. What word comes to mind to describe that person? For me, it is a person who offers radical hospitality. Not just the everyday variety of ‘come in, would you like coffee ‘hospitality…but the person whose ability to welcome and include allows the one being welcomed to actually become part of the group, and to blossom as they discover their talents. It’s the person whose first thoughts are not ‘me’…. what do I get or how do I feel…but are for the other…no matter how similar or different the ‘other’ might be. It’s the person who works at breaking down barriers…any of the things that keep us apart or categorize people into ‘us ‘and ‘them’. It’s the person who forges and works at strengthening relationships,

Jesus did his networking with the poor and marginalized, the sick and unclean, the sinful and the outliers in society. I would suggest even in our privileged midst, those adjectives apply in our world today. To work toward becoming ‘great’ today, what you and I need to do is simply begin to reach out to those who are lost or left behind in our society. To reach out to those without the power or privilege we enjoy and take for granted. By doing that, we start to work toward saving our own life, through Christ.

There is no need for any one of us to be the ‘greatest’…seen to be over and above everyone else. It’s when we reach out in love, humility and generosity that we become a little more like the man who ensured we have a future in God’s Kingdom. AMEN