

To be the Greatest you must be the Least
Mark 9:33-37

Friends I don't know if you are a big fan of reality TV or not – I guess it probably depends on the show. But fan or not you are probably familiar with the Donald Trump's reality show – The Apprentice.

Each week a group of young executives are given some sort of business project to execute together – one group wins the other loses and the worst performers from the losing group are sent home.

Each participant must strive to outperform their counterparts in the hopes that their achievements will prevent them from being sent home so that they are the only one left standing at the end. This person will be chosen by multi-millionaire business magnate Donald Trump to work in one of his companies.

Of course with so much on the line the competition is fierce and much drama ensues as the contestants work together and compete against each other for the glory of being crowned as “the apprentice”

And it seems that Jesus disciples were slightly ahead of their time because in today's passage we see them acting like contestants on a reality show, competing against each other, arguing with each other about who should be crowned as “the ultimate disciple” and get the glory of being considered Jesus' right hand man in the Kingdom of Heaven.

You see friends in spite of Jesus' efforts to explain to his disciples that He was not really the Messiah of their hopes and dreams they continue to see only the crowds and miracles and Jesus' word about having to suffer and die seem incongruous with them and they don't sink in.

And just a few days before this Peter, James and John went up a mountain with Jesus and they witness Jesus revealing his heavenly glory, and meeting with two of Israel's greatest leaders – Moses and Elijah.

So we'll have to go a bit easy on the disciples for not getting it just yet – The two times Jesus has spoken about having to suffer and die as the messiah are eclipsed by the day to day

reality which they are experiencing with him as they travel back from the northern parts of Israel towards Jerusalem.

And when they stop in Capernaum, Jesus – knowing full well what had been going on - asks them “what were you arguing about on the road?”

Friends the irony here, if you can picture it – is that Jesus is really a dead man walking. Going to Jerusalem means going to his death – and the disciples are following behind quarrelling like kids at school about who gets to be next in line for the drinking fountain.

If they had grasped what Jesus was trying to warn them about they would be fighting to be last in line – not first.

But that identifies the real issue here friends – its not that the disciples are arguing with each other, but that they are so focused on their status and what can make them great!

Friends, the disciples still believed that Jesus was a superstar- Jesus Christ Superstar – and they wanted to be close to him so that his greatness would increase their status.

So...what sorts of things do you and I like to get close to because it increases our status and makes us look great in the eyes of others?

Who do we want to work for because they are admired for their achievements? What neighborhood do we want to live in and where do we want our kids to go to school because it reflects that we have been successful?

What kind of vehicle do we want to drive because it projects an image of power or wealth or environmental awareness – or says anything but “soccer mom?” What kinds of brand names do we want to wear because they are trendy and cool?

Who do we want to rub shoulders with, who do we want to say “we know” so that we can appear important?

Or maybe you are somewhat of a social rebel – and status and pretention mean nothing to you, in fact you disdain it -

Ironically that’s what you consider to be great is being around the down-and-out people and living a simple lifestyle so that people cans see how unpretentious you are!

Friends there are all sorts of ways in which we can compete with each other and try to get close to the things which we think are great... so that we can look great, and feel great and believe that we are great.

And you might say – ok, maybe it's a bit shallow but if nobody gets hurt what's wrong with wanting to be great?

Well friends - it will cause us to miss Jesus...because while the salvation and eternal life that He offers us is great, the way He accomplished this was not... It was through being condemned and executed as the worst of criminals.

And just so you understand this – in our society the worst of criminals would be someone who rapes and murders children – many people would support the return of the death penalty for such offenders.

So, when Jesus offered his life through crucifixion, He allowed himself to be considered the equivalent of a child rapist in his day.

How close will you and I want to get to that if we are preoccupied with our status and how we can pursue greatness... we won't see the Jesus who can save us.

And that's a risk we don't want to take – and the good news friends is that Jesus doesn't want to see us to take it either.

So Jesus gathers his disciples around and he instructs them “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

In other words this is not about increasing their status, going from fisherman to being someone who is in tight with the Messiah. In Jesus' world you don't just serve those who will make you look good – you serve everyone, even those who won't increase your status.

To illustrate what he means Jesus calls over someone who was insignificant... someone who did not have any power or influence, who could bestow no gifts of gratitude, someone who was of little importance in that society - a child.

Jesus continues on – “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me”

He is telling the disciples if they want to be great by being close to Him, the best way to do it is by babysitting – by serving those who are insignificant in his name.

And for us friends that doesn't necessarily mean children. In our context children are very significant! There is a great deal of status that can be achieved by serving the children here in our community.

So how does Jesus speak to our lives? What good news should we hear in His words?

Friends we need to hear Jesus saying to us – give up any concern you might have about your status and any desire you might have to be great – and do so by serving those who are insignificant, and that will be different for each of us.

Back in the day, as an aspiring to be a Christian Hip-hop artist, street-cred was the greatest thing in my eyes. I desperately want to improve my status by going from being a white

suburban kid to being viewed as a school of hard knocks, don't mess with me, street smart tough guy. That was greatness for me.

So anything I could do to have some of that rub off on me – dressed the part, bought the music, watched the movies, talked the talk, tried to hang out other who exuded that street-cred which I admired. Street ministry at the men's mission in downtown Hamilton – sign me up!

But I was always insecure and wondering if other people and my peers really saw me as being great in this way.

For me serving “the children” meant letting go of that conception of greatness as “street-cred” and what I was doing to try and achieve it. Christ's path for me was to become a minister – something I had always fought against because it seemed so un-cool to me and so insignificant.

But as I began to walk down that path, I encountered Christ – just like Jesus said. And I experienced God working in my life in all sorts of ways and as a result I found that I was at peace

with who I was. I like myself now and I'm not insecure anymore.

Do you want this, do you want this for those you love?

Then friends the other wonderful thing we need to hear Jesus saying to us is that God is the answer to our self-esteem and self image issues which drive our pursuit of status and greatness.

And I don't mean that we're automatically going to feel better about ourselves because we learn that "God loves us" of course God loves us - he's God...

Our problem is that *we* don't like ourselves because the reality is that Sin and Evil have affected our self-esteem and our self-image.

You see scripture reveals to us that we were created to know our God intimately... but when Adam and Eve rebelled against God that intimacy was destroyed and our self-esteem plummeted.

Separation from God, lack of intimacy with God, leads to self esteem and self image issues.

Not convinced? – friends why do you think the bible says that immediately after our first parents sinned they felt naked and attempted to cover up with fig leaves?

And ever since then we have been conditioned to believe we can cover up our faults, flaws and inadequacies, even our sins, in the same manner...by getting as close as we can to something great so that we appear great as well.

We can even pursue Jesus in this way – just like the disciples were. But Jesus is walking down a path which goes away from greatness and the things we naturally admire.

But... if we follow Him, by giving up our attempt to remedy our self-esteem and insecurity through our accomplishments, our possessions, our image by deliberately engaging what seems to make us insignificant in our own eyes –

If we do this Jesus promises we won't miss him... we will encounter him, and not just Him but the one who sent Him – God the Father...our Creator!

And then “God loves you” isn't just a pat answer anymore, it's the reality you experience in your life.

So you go from believing things *about* God the Father, Christ and the Holy Spirit to experiencing an every-day relationship with Him – because in serving those who you believe are insignificant you've made room in your person for Him...

There is room where you used to try and fit the great things which you believed would make you feel better about yourself.

And you will realize very quickly friends... that space was never meant to fit anything else but Him to begin with.

And you will be amazed at how you no longer feel the need to increase your status, how you feel at peace with yourself, how great it is to be able to like yourself!

Isn't that amazing to hear, isn't Jesus awesome for telling us this? I think so.

Friends I hope that if you take away just one thing from our time with Jesus this morning that you remember this...

The next time you feel that urge to compete with everyone else to be great, however you do it – turn away from it and deliberately do something for someone you feel is insignificant – and watch what happens in your life.

Because the truth is friends, if you want to be great you must serve the least. Amen.