

## Mark 9:30-37

Pentecost 18; September 22 & 23, 2024

(Show the “Invisible Gorilla Study” clip.) Participants were required to watch a video of students passing a basketball. They were asked to count how many times the players wearing white passed the basketball. During the video, a person in a gorilla suit walked between the groups that were passing the basketball. After the video, they were questioned about what they saw. Only 44% of the participants noticed the gorilla. 56% never saw the gorilla. The study showed that people can be blind to aspects of a situation right in front of them. I’m guilty of it. My wife says it all the time: *Didn’t you see that? I told you that. (selective sight or hearing?)* Now I’ve got the proof that I’m not the only one.

This is the problem with the disciples in this Gospel text. They failed the Invisible Gorilla Study. They have been with Jesus for two years, seen thousands of miracles. This is the 2nd time Jesus told them that He was going to Jerusalem where He would be arrested, and killed, then after three days He would rise from death. **“But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.”** They didn’t get what Jesus meant by all this because their view of greatness was not the same as Jesus’ view of greatness. With typical adult pride, they wouldn’t ask for fear of embarrassment. They knew he had been talking about it, but it just doesn’t make sense yet. So, they talked about something else. Mark tells us: **“They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road? “But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.”**

You can almost imagine how their argument went. Peter may have piped up first: *“I’m the spokesman for this group, and it was my confession that Jesus said was the rock on which he’d build his church and the gates of hell would never overtake it. After all, I walked on water with Jesus.”* Then maybe Judas: *“Oh yeah, but you sank. Who’s the keeper of the money around here? I’ve got the money; therefore, I have the power. After all, money means power.”* Then maybe Matthew would join in: *“You want to talk about money? I had lots of it as a tax collector. I was really good at what I did. Look how much I left behind to join this group.”* Then maybe Andrew said: *“I was the first disciple. I’ve got seniority.”* Then James and John could say to Peter: *“My brother and I are the greatest. After all, we were the only brothers who were up there on that Mount and saw Jesus transfigured.”* Then, finally, John: *“But I’m the disciple that Jesus loves!”*

They all had ambitions for themselves, and weren’t looking at the needs of others. I would guess that most of us have said the very same thing. Their whole conversation that they were having along the road centered on greatness. Yet, when Mark tells us that when Jesus asks them: **“What were you arguing about on the road?”** Their mouths stopped moving and remained silent. This is a debate that they were passionate about, yet did not want to share their words with their Lord and Teacher.

Those 12 disciples had a problem when it came to defining greatness. How about us? It’s hard to do, isn’t it? Even though the disciples didn’t want to tell Jesus what they had been talking about, he gives them an answer to the question. **“Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”** Let’s be honest. This is not the way that we often live our lives. That’s probably not what most of us were taught or told growing up. Sure, we heard that on a Sunday morning, but then Monday came. Then our life becomes about being number one, a winner, a success. It’s about power, control, wealth, fame, reputation, status and position.

When we were sitting at the airport in Denver last week Monday night, there was a young child and a father who were traveling from Denver to Milwaukee. It was late, and the girl was probably over-tired. In order for the next statement to make sense, you need to understand how Southwest Airlines boards its passengers. You are in three groups – A, B or C. The A’s get to board first; the C’s are the last. Back to the little girl. She began to throw a small fit because she didn’t want to be in the C’s. *“I want to be in the A’s.” (several times).* Nancy and I turned to each other and said, *we all want to be in the A’s.* It just so happened that we were in the A’s that night.

Think about professional sports. Have you ever seen the losing team of the World Series or the Super Bowl dancing around the next day holding two fingers in the air chanting: *We’re number 2! We’re number 2!* Can you a politician celebrating the next day after losing? Who wants to be the servant of all? That’s not the greatness that we are striving for. We want to be great. We don’t want to be last.

Jesus is not saying that we should not or cannot be great. He's not saying that we should not use the gifts and the talents that he gives to the best of our abilities. Rather, he is asking us to reframe our understanding of greatness. In order to do that, he takes a small child and places him right smack in the middle of all of them. **"He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."**

His point is simple. This is not about having a child-like faith. The child is a symbol for something else. The child is a symbol of vulnerability, powerlessness, and dependency. The child in Jesus' day had no rights, no status, no economic value. The child was a consumer and not a producer. Greatness, Jesus says, is in welcoming and receiving into our arms one like this, regardless of his or her age.

Greatness never puts itself in a position of superiority over another. It is not about me, my bank account, my job, my accomplishments, reputation and status. Greatness is found in words of Jesus: **"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."** When we are putting ourselves last and serving someone who needs to be served and could never repay us, we are living Christ-like lives. We are serving God. Think of how Christ serves us. He came to the cross to pay for our sins. Christ still comes to remind us of the power of the cross. One way He does this is during a baptism. At the baptism of an infant, Jesus places a child in our midst. When the pastor receives the child from his or her parents, he does something strange. He makes the sign of the cross on the child's forehead and chest. This child is marked as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus gives us his body and blood to assure us that we are forgiven. He comes to serve us.

We live in a world that is full of distractions. Yet, there are even times when we may practice selective sight and hearing. May God help all of us to follow the words of Jesus: **"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."** May God grant it. Amen.