

Downward Mobility

Chris Currie

Mark 9:30-37

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³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

This is probably a strange way to begin a sermon, but I am kind of off to a strange start a with you already, so what the heck. Worship is work. I know we live in a time where worship is equated with religious entertainment and people like me providing you with the right religious opiate or religious sizzle to whip you into a fervor, but worship is also work. And that's not to say it shouldn't be enjoyable or entertaining or even fun. You may think you come empty-handed or perhaps with an offering, but you also come with your hearts, your anxieties, your minds, your souls, and it takes work to pack all that apparatus up and to walk in here with it. You may think sitting in pews and participating in worship is a fairly passive act, but it is not. Receiving, attending, hearing, listening for a word of grace are not passive acts at all, but actions that require a tremendous amount of work, work that is often not valued in this time. All that is to say yes I began this work with you in the midst of a hurricane that knocked us and all our lives and plans off course a bit. But there were priests and ministers called to their congregations in New York City in September of 2001, and I am sure there were new pastorates started in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina as well. There are always auspicious beginnings and circumstances beyond our control; my message to you today is who cares about the circumstances of the start, let's get to work.

Greatness. Whether or not all of us aspire to it, we all think we know what it is and we all have to respect and admire it. Last year during the pandemic, ESPN produced a ten-part series on the Chicago Bulls of the 1990s and the debate on greatness, at least in the genre of NBA basketball was reignited...Jordan or Lebron...Bulls or

Warriors...Celtics or Lakers...who was the Greatest of All Time, the GOAT. And it doesn't just happen in the sports world...it happens in the art world or the music world or the world of Presidential politics. Every time a new President of the United States is inaugurated, there is always a debate or new list of the top ten greatest presidents of all time and usually a bottom ten as well. We've tried various ways to capture greatness and sometimes such efforts just show how captivated we are to the sentiments of the prevailing moment. For instance, if we measured the greatness of lives based on how tall a monument the person got, I think the record would be pretty spotty at best. It just doesn't always add up and the measurements do not come out just right.

One of my favorite attempts to measure greatness is found on a small easy to miss plaque down in the crypt at St. Paul's Cathedral where the architect Christopher Wren is buried. At the bottom of the grave marker, it reads in Latin: 'Lector, Si Monumentum Requiris Circumspice.' Translation: 'Reader, if you seek his memorial, look around you.' Look at the beautiful dome, the choir, the pillars, the gallery, which is not just a monument to Wren himself, but something made for the glory of God and for generations of human lives to be awe-struck, lifted up, and met by the divine mystery. Still perhaps another way or lack thereof of leaving a memorial or some greatness behind is passed on to us by our own Reformed forebear, John Calvin, who left specific instructions that he be buried in an unmarked grave...instructions that were carried out. Now today if you go to Geneva there is a great memorial with statues of the early Reformers, Calvin, Beza, Zwingli, Knox, but in the 16th century, Calvin had seen the over the top way the medieval world had celebrated their heroes and heroines with monuments and markers and didn't want to have anything to do with it. He opted for a pauper's funeral. John Knox did not fare much better...you will find his final resting place around car park marker 23 outside of St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh where a stone reads: 'approximate site of the burial in St. Giles graveyard of John Knox.' I am not sure this is exactly what Joni Mitchell meant when she sings that they've paved paradise and put up a parking lot, but maybe.

What is true greatness and how do we know it when we see it? Here Jesus gives his disciples a pretty stark and clear definition: 'the Messiah will be betrayed, killed, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' That's greatness. And not exactly a confusing or convoluted message...seems pretty straightforward and clear-cut and yet Mark tells us that after Jesus gives this teaching to the disciples on what Messianic greatness and divine greatness look like, 'they did not understand what he was saying,' and they were afraid to ask for any follow-ups. Which makes me wonder maybe they did understand a little bit and just didn't want to know any more. Death, Resurrection, Mystery. It's not exactly the kind of greatness we usually fashion for ourselves. So to kill time, to change the subject, or to think about more pleasant things, the disciples get into a debate and discussion with each other about which one of them was the greatest. In Matthew's translation, James and John even go a step further and ask Jesus to grant them

a seat at his right and at his left in the kingdom of heaven so that they may not only achieve greatness but be guaranteed to be the greatest of all the disciples. Here, Mark just tells us that as they are walking to Capernaum they get into an argument about which one of them was the greatest. I wonder what criteria they used or what qualified as the best resume...loyalty to Jesus...getting all the right answers in Sunday School...voted most likely to succeed at Sea of Galilee High...best interpreter of Jesus' teachings...most efficient at handing out loaves and fish on the hillside...New Testament commentator Robert Capon reminds us that Jesus spoke in parables and confused the heck out of everyone, even his disciples, and that was part of the plan.

After all, 'mention 'messiah to (the disciples), and they would picture a king on horseback, not a carpenter on a cross; mention 'forgiveness' and they would start setting up rules about when it ran out.' Capon continues 'from Jesus' point of view, the sooner their misguided minds had the props knocked from under them, the better. After all their yammer about how God should or shouldn't run his own operation, getting them to just stand there with their eyes popped and their mouths shut would be a giant step forward.'¹ That had to have been the disciples reaction after Jesus gave them this following up teaching on greatness that 'whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Not the kind of monument or the kind of greatness, the disciples, are any of us for the matter, are searching for. And maybe even worse, we can equally be our most dangerous when we are knocking each other out of the way trying to be last of all and a servant to all. That kind of defeats the point too.

Our first reading today comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians, and the second half of the reading, roughly verses 6 -11 were most likely the words of a hymn that would have been known not only to the Philippians but perhaps to many of the earliest Christian communities. Like most of Paul's letters, he calls upon the Christian community to live in the world, in spite of selfish and sometimes misguided pursuits of greatness, to live with humility, to seek the interests of others, and to share the mind of Christ who though he was divine did not regard his divinity as something to be celebrated and memorialized and lorded over, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant, humbling himself to live a live of simplicity and die a death of humiliation. God exalts this humiliation and raises it from the dead, but it is never a way of life, never a form of humanity, and never a type of greatness that is going to be real appealing to us. It's a long obedience. It is not about notoriety or even self-advancement. It is about pursuing a kind of self-forgetfulness and even self-sacrifice. And so headlong into the disciples lives, the disciples pursuits, the disciples self-interest, and the disciples arguments about greatness comes a Messiah whose own way of life is going to question, undermine, undo, and put back together all

¹ Robert Capon, 'A Word about Parables,' in *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 7.

their notions of greatness. It's not like they are going to just let go if their own delusions of grandeur and their own longings for ephemeral forms of greatness. And neither do we.

Just because we try to live as followers of Jesus Christ and seek to be counted as his disciples in this world does not mean we are going to magically stop being enamored with being the greatest or arguing with each other over which one of us is. But even in the midst of our misshapen longings and our own human desires for self-promotion and advancement, the Lord who emptied himself is relentless and just keeps coming toward us in the form of a servant of all and the least of all, crossing our paths, intersecting with our upward aspirations, rescuing us from the worst in ourselves, and brushing up against us with divine humility, showering our own shallowness with the depths of his grace. We don't magically turn into perfectly humble servant-minded disciples...and neither did Peter, James, and John. We just keep having what we thought was all that mattered invaded, upended, and expanded by a Savior who believes true greatness lies in forfeiting our claims on it and our pursuits of it.

In the aftermath of the twentieth anniversary of September 11th, it is not lost on us that so many of the heroes and heroines of that day were known only by a red bandana or a badge number or a hand lost in the smoke and the dust that would not let go until bringing someone to safety. Sure those people had dreams and had their own pursuits of greatness, but none of them were not trying to be 'great' that day. They made school lunches and were in the carpool or on the train or carrying their coffee just like we all might be doing tomorrow or the next day. What is memorable is that their ordinariness did not prohibit them from doing something extraordinary for their neighbors in an existential crisis. In the midst of their pursuits, their own arguments of greatness, their own struggles and challenges, their own human messiness, something enabled them to empty all that for the sake of people in their time of need.

Thankfully our own lives may rarely feel as dramatic, but rest assured the divine headwinds are as strong today as they have always been, gracefully upending our own notions of greatness. Even though we can't just force ourselves to become humble, a servant in all circumstances, and free of our captivity to greatness in all its forms, the Lord who became a servant is on a collision course with us daily. My hope for you and for me is that such happy accidents occur frequently with us, undoing us and all we thought life was about, putting us back together by God's grace, and in spite of our admiration and indulgent desires for greatness, altering our course and exalting our lives in Christ's own self-humbling faithfulness. Though we are not likely to find many monuments or even markers there, it's the only kind of true greatness. Amen.