

For What Kind of Greatness Will We Strive?

People of God – people sourced by immeasurable Love, I invite us to wonder together this morning: For what kind of greatness will we strive? On this first day of autumn and our Grand Opening Sunday, we are right on time to be wondering about the greatness for which we strive – both individually and as a community. Love had drawn us together – via livestream and here in a house of worship on land which the Wahpekute Dakota people and other people have loved for millennia before us.

As we move into this time of wondering, let's pause to pray. Holy Spirit, we long for your gentle, fiercely loving energy to enliven us today. Lead us to deepen our appreciation for the greatness you nurture in others and in ourselves. Guide the meditations of our hearts and minds, we pray. Amen.

Friends in faith, today's scriptures invite us to wonder alongside Jesus' closest disciples about greatness. At its core, greatness is the power to influence – to affect people and circumstances. Let's ground ourselves in this topic by bringing to mind some people from each of our lives.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment if you're comfortable doing so. Now let someone whom you have known personally and whom you have admired or deeply appreciated surface in your mind. Perhaps you have used words like "great" or "wonderful" to describe this person. The person coming into focus for you might be living or deceased. This person has influenced you for the better. They have influenced how you want to live your life. Keeping your eyes closed, I invite you to consider: What qualities of that person have contributed to their influence on you? What sort of greatness have they shown you?

Now, opening our eyes to one another, let's welcome one- or two-word share outs. If you'd like, without naming names, please call out the great qualities of those influential persons in our lives. I'll repeat what you say, and we'll leave a moment between each quality to let it settle in with us. What quality of greatness does that person model for you? *[trustworthy, caring, encouraging, kind, open mind, patient, understated, consistency, joyful, thoughtful]* Thanks be to God for those qualities with which these people (these saints in our lives) have influenced us.

Now for part B of this exercise (timely, perhaps, in this election season), I invite you to close your eyes again and let's shift to the public sphere. What public figure have you experienced as highly influential for the better? Whether or not they have had a significant impact on your way of being, who is a public figure whom you have witnessed as great, influencing the ways people think and act for the better? And what qualities of that person do you perceive as contributing to their high level of influence on people? Let a quality of that great, influential public figure rise for you. Opening our eyes to one another, let's hear a few more one- or two-word share outs. Again, without their names, please call out the great qualities of these publicly influential persons. *[honest, humility, heroism, bipartisan, servant leader]*

Each of us has a public presence through our participation in this congregation. Which of those qualities of greatness (both from the individuals in your personal life and from public figures whose ways have impacted you) will we harness as we strive to realize our vision by living out our mission? We are striving to realize our vision, which is this: *"We envision an ever-expanding safe harbor where we thrive together and work with God toward love and justice."*

And we will realize it by living out our mission: *“Moved by deepening relationships with God and each other, we unite with the wider community to transform our values into action.”* Again, which of those qualities of greatness from the saints of our lives and from public figures will we harness in our work.

Let’s turn to our reading from the gospel of Mark to notice what qualities Jesus lifted up as highly influential or part of greatness? We heard Sharri read, *“They returned home to Capernaum. Once they were inside the house, Jesus began to ask them, ‘What were you discussing on the way home?’ At this they fell silent, for on the way they had been arguing about who among them was the greatest. So Jesus sat down and called the Twelve over and said, ‘If any of you wants to be first, you must be the last one of all and at the service of all.’ Then Jesus brought a little child into their midst and, putting his arm around the child, said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes a child such as this for my sake welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me.’”*

Jesus invited his closest friends, then and now, to seek to be great or influential by welcoming and living in mutuality, open to serving and being served by others of all social locations (including age, gender, orientation, race, ethnicity, social class, and all the aspects we cherish in our identities). He also invites us to welcome and include those who have little access to traditional forms of power and influence, open to what they will teach us about greatness. I would not be surprised if many of the persons of influence whose qualities we named earlier have also embodied answers to Jesus’ call to serve others and welcome the influence of those otherwise on-the-margins persons. These are gentle, strong ways to be great. We can each tap into greatness as we serve and welcome.

Let's shift to today's reading from the book of James. The words remind me of a Norman Rockwell painting that adorned my childhood bedroom wall and now hangs in my office in our church building. In the painting, a medical doctor listens for the heartbeat of a doll thrust toward him by a trusting child. Below the image are the words, "*What wisdom is there that is greater than kindness?*" (Rosseau) Ever a straightforward voice, the reading from James began, "*If there are any wise and learned among you, let them show it by good living-with humility, and with wisdom in their actions.*" Certainly, rarely wavering kindness is one of the wise qualities of many of those people who have influenced us and whom we hope to emulate.

James continues: "*But if you have the bitterness of jealousy or self-seeking ambition in your hearts, be careful or you'll find yourself becoming arrogant and covering up the truth with lies. Where there is jealousy and ambition, there is also disharmony and wickedness of every kind.*" We, along with Jesus disciples – arguing over their relative greatness, have all experienced the bitterness of jealousy and self-seeking ambition. And we've all let jealousy or self-seeking ambition lead to the instability and unease of arrogance and covering up of truer, vulnerable, beautiful parts of ourselves.

The reading from James continues: "*The wisdom from above, however, has purity as its essence. It works for peace; it's gentle and considerate. It's full of compassion and shows itself by doing good. Nor is there any trace of partiality or hypocrisy in it. Peacemakers, when they work for peace, sow the seeds which will bear fruit in holiness.*" The wisdom of God, of love – of deep love, is often embodied through steady, gentle consideration of the other.

It does take conscious practice for us to adopt a slowed, gentle enough pace to have the spaciousness to consider the other. We all want to act compassionately, but the slowed gentle pace of the doctor listening to the doll's heart is required for us to notice windows of opportunity and then act with compassion. We will not see the windows of opportunity unless we are at a gentle pace.

James continues: *"Where do these conflicts and battles among you first start? Isn't it that they come from the desires that battle within you?"* Indeed, we often struggle into jealousy or self-seeking ambition when our own needs for compassion are not met. I recall a moment I shared with my son Sam several years ago. *"Mom, can I have a hug?"* Sam asked spontaneously. And with an iPad between our two bodies, I sort of slumped over him and gave him as much of a hug as SEEMED possible. To that he responded, *"No. A better hug."* And so we shared a better hug. And he was brave to name his need for compassion. And how can we effectively share compassion with others unless we make sure our needs are met in a healthy way?

Again, from James, *"If there are any wise and learned among you, let them show it by good living-with humility, and with wisdom in their actions."* And today's reading from James ends this way: *"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you."* May we within this congregation model for one another ways of drawing nearer to the love of God – so that we can effectively share it in our own day-to-day living and in our growing partnerships in the wider community.

As we journey forward, may we be like the trees that the Psalmist envisions:

*“They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.”*

How will we approach greatness – the greatness of deep, loving wisdom?
Let us do it with gentleness and fierce grace, because Love is counting on
us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll

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Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3,7-8a, Mk 9:30-37