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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“TRUE GREATNESS”

Luke 9:46-48

☑ We recently vacationed in Washington D.C. Monuments, memorials, plaques, statues and gardens dedicated to “great” men and women number in the hundreds, if not the thousands.

These people have had considerable impact. Some reached the heights of political, economic, military, and social power. They changed the course of history, often for better, sometimes for worse.

❓ But *what is real greatness? Who defines it? How is it measured?*

■ In Luke 9:46, **“An argument [starts] among the disciples as to which of them [will] be the greatest.”**

⊕ Luke does not report what triggered the quarrel, but the context suggests a likely possibility. It is the day after Christ’s Transfiguration, reported in verses 28-36.

○ Peter, James, and John were with Jesus. They saw **“the appearance of his face [change]”** as it {Mt 17:2} **“shone like the sun,”** saw **“his clothes [turn] as bright as a flash of lightning,”** saw Moses and Elijah **“[appear] in glorious splendor with Jesus,”** saw **“a cloud [appear] and [cover] them,”** heard the voice of Almighty God say **“This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”**

{Lk 9:36} Meanwhile, the other nine disciples were down at the foot of the mountain. They saw nothing. They have not yet been told about the Transfiguration. They are in the dark.

Do Peter, James, and John feel superior? Do they presume that Messiah is elevating them to a place of privilege and authority over their brothers?

Do the other nine catch a whiff of self-importance from Peter, James, and John? Are they irritated, offended, resentful, or threatened?

Regardless, the Twelve are arguing about **“which of them [will] be the greatest.”**

■ In verses 47-48 **“Jesus, knowing their thoughts, [takes] a little child and [has] him stand beside him. Then he [says] ... ‘Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For whoever is least among you all is the greatest.’”**

The disciples are quarrelling about their greatness, relative to each other. If they were to rephrase their argument as a question it would be: *“Which of us will be Number One in the Kingdom of God?”*

○ {Mt 16:18; Jn 21:7; Lk 9:41} We expect the Lord to say something like, **“Peter will be greatest, for ‘on this rock I will build my church,’”** or **“John, since he is ‘the disciple whom [I have] loved,’”** or **“None of you! ‘How long shall I stay with you and put up with you?’”**

He does not say any of those things.

Q Question: *“Which one of us will be the greatest?”*

A Answer, Part A: “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Christ reframes the issue from a different perspective, and what he says reveals a crucial truth.

✎ Stated negatively, real greatness does not consist of, and is not measured by, worldly prestige or power.

The disciples see greatness as lofty social status and power over others; or if not, they see it as the qualities and achievements by which one can acquire status and power. They have a worldly point of view.

Merciful God, save us from false greatness!

✎ Stated positively, real greatness consists of welcoming God in Christ.

📖 The word “**welcome**” in verse 48 implies more than conventional hospitality. It signifies sincere reception, personal acceptance, and *αγαπε* love and, where Jesus is involved, intellectual belief and spiritual trust.

○ To welcome God is to enter into relationship with Jesus: a life-changing, saving relationship of faith, hope, and love in which his Holy Spirit dwells within us. In Revelation 3:20 he says, “**Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.**”

✎ Asking Jesus into one’s heart is an internal, spiritual reality. Yet it has an external, concrete dimension, without which our faith is incomplete or, worse, imaginary. Our testimony that we have welcomed Christ is not a purely subjective claim; it can be measured by our Christian

hospitality and care for the “**little child.**” Verse 48: “**Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me.**”

What does the Lord mean?

Surely, “**this little child**” is not less than flesh-and-blood boys and girls. We are to welcome actual infants, toddlers, children, and teens into our church, our homes, and our lives.

☑ But “**this little child**” includes others besides literal youngsters. {Morris} To quote Leon Morris, “**The children stand for the helpless and unimportant.**”

First century Jewish children were cherished and doted on. Still, they had no legal rights, and no voice in what happened to them. They were “**helpless.**” Also, a child’s value rested on what he or she might become: a parent and a productive community member. As children they were economically and politically “**unimportant.**”

Keep in mind that the word “**welcome**” evokes a relationship of love expressed in acceptance and hands-on care for material, emotional, social, and spiritual needs.

Putting it all together we can paraphrase verse 48 to go something like this: “Whoever welcomes with words and with deeds the ordinary, the vulnerable, and the insignificant, welcomes Jesus.”

☑ As William Barclay said, “**If you are prepared to spend your life serving, helping, loving people who, in the eyes of the world, do not matter at all, you are serving**” God the Son and God the Father.

Q Question: *“Which one of us will be greatest?”*

A Answer, Part B: **“Whoever is least among you all is the greatest.”**

Real greatness is welcoming God in Christ. It is measured by our reception of **“the helpless and unimportant.”** That standard is entirely appropriate, for the **“least among [us] is,”** in fact, **“the greatest.”**

The implications are staggering.

✈ 1st) Jesus is “greatest” because he made himself “least.”

○ Philippians 2:9-11:

**God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above
every name,
that at the name of Jesus ever knee
should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under
the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that
Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

○ Why? Philippians 2:6-8:

**...being in very nature God,
[he] did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his
own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.**

**And being found in appearance as a
human being,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!**

The New Testament does not concern itself with the physical agonies of the cross; it zeroes in on Christ’s humiliation and abasement. **“He made himself nothing”!**

✈ 2nd) Jesus keeps coming to us in “the least”.

○ Do you remember the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats? Matthew 25:31-46:

**“When the Son of Man comes in his
glory...he he will separate the people one
from another as a shepherd separates the
sheep from the goats. He will put his sheep
on his right and the goats on his left.**

**“...the King will say to those on his right,
‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father;
take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared
for you since the creation of the world. For I
was hungry and you gave me something to
eat, I was thirsty and you gave me
something to drink, I was a stranger and you
invited me in, I [was naked] and you clothed
me, I was sick and you looked after me, I
was in prison and you came to visit me.’**

**“Then the righteous will [ask], ‘Lord, when
did we [do these things for you]?’**

“The King will reply, ‘...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

But to those on his left he will say, **“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”** – because **“whatever [they] did not do for one of the least of these, [they] did not do for”** Christ Jesus.

May we be sheep, not goats!

✎ **3rd**) To be great we must welcome the least. To be greatest we must be least.

- Sovereign God calls some disciples to radical obscurity and poverty. Such men and women are unable to fund ministry to the poor and the oppressed; but they are well able to *do* ministry among the poor and the oppressed.
- All other Christ Followers are called to relative obscurity and poverty. Striving to advance God’s kingdom instead of our own is indispensable to self-denial and cross-bearing. This might mean choosing a less prestigious career, declining a promotion, living in a more modest home, or serving in unglamorous or risky circumstances.

Intentional downward mobility does not, in and of itself, make a person great. It is great when it is done in obedience to Christ with an attitude of humility.

Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself (in the sense of, “I am so stupid, so useless, so worthless”); it means thinking off yourself less.

☑ Thomas Merton got it right when he observed: **“Our Christian destiny is a great one; but we cannot achieve greatness unless we lose all interest in being great.”**

When we do turn our gaze inward, it is to recognize our absolute need for God’s mercy and kindness and our utter dependence upon him.

Living like this probably won’t earn us a plaque in DC. It is not the way to take charge in Washington, in Hollywood, on Wall Street, or even on Main Street. Some of our neighbors will respect our convictions in an abstract way; but how many actually want to actually live them out in our social, economic, and political relationships?

Still. If we want our lives to matter; if we desire to glorify God and bless others; if we long to make our corner of the world a better place, this is the way.

Hear the Word of the Lord in Luke 9:46-48:

An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For whoever is least among you all is the greatest.”