**Measures of Greatness**

**Text: Mark 9:35**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Some of you may remember a silly song from years ago that claims:

“O Lord, it’s hard to be humble

When you’re perfect in every way.”

That could’ve been the theme song of Jesus’ disciples as we move into the second half of Mark’s gospel. Jesus had become well known – despite his attempts to keep a low profile – and the disciples were started to bask in his glow. They were letting his growing fame go to their heads. We can imagine them pulling people aside and saying, “Hey listen; I’ve been hangin’ with the Son of God! How ‘bout that?!” Last week we heard John and James asking to be seated on either side of Jesus as he sits upon the throne that they assumed he was soon to occupy. They desired for themselves seats of honor and glory. Today we learn that all 12 disciples were arguing about who among them is the greatest. I mean, here’s Jesus predicting for the second time that he’s going to be killed and then rise again, and we’re told “the disciples did not understand what he was saying.” *I guess not*; considering what they were talking about! When you’re worried about who gets the glory seat, the possibility that one might voluntarily lay down his life for the sake of others isn’t even on your radar screen!

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). That’s what Jesus says to his glory seeking disciples. It’s not the first time that he’s tried to impress upon them the call to selfless service, and it won’t be the last.

“Service above self.” Some of us know that as the motto of Rotary. “Service above self” is also the ethic of the New Testament. As we noted last week, Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. Greatness lies not in drawing honor or prestige or power or wealth or attention to self, but in letting go of yourself; in forgetting about yourself. Jesus illustrates the point by picking-up a little child. And he says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37).

You see, in Jesus’ day – in the honor-driven society of antiquity – greatness was often judged by the company that you kept. So, if you had the resources to throw a party, you wanted to invite some Roman big-wig, or the chief priests of the Temple; someone who’s socially-sanctioned greatness might cast a glow on you. To welcome to your party an unknown child or a homeless person or even an unemployed fisherman would bring no honor to the host. But Jesus says that welcoming one such as these – one who has no power or prestige – is to welcome the One who has the most power, the One who has the most glory, the One who sent Jesus himself into the world. To welcome and to serve one of the least of these is to welcome and to serve the Lord of Creation.

To seek self-glory is a form of the sin of pride. It’s part of our sinful nature from which Jesus has saved us. To seek self-glory is to be trapped in the illusion that life is all about *me*. But it’s not all about me. Or all about you. It’s about being a servant. Serving others is one of the fruits of salvation; it’s what the Church is called to do. The disciples were caught in that trap of self-centeredness. Despite all of the time they spent with Jesus, they were caught in that trap, big time!

And so are we. All of us, and all of humanity, have at least a *little* desire for self-glory. For example, when I come around suppertime, if Helen gets home before I do, she might ask me how my day was. And maybe I’ve done some visiting that day, so I’ll say, “I spent the whole afternoon visiting some of our homebound members.” Now why would those be the first words out of my mouth? Partly because it’s a real joy to be engaged in that servant ministry of visitation. But also because there’s a little part of me that loves to hear my wife say, “Oh Honey, you’re such a good pastor!”

All of us, to some degree, are seeking not service but self-glory. Of course, in the church, we *espouse* the life of service. But even in our service, we sometimes put ourselves first. That might be ourselves as individuals: getting all self-righteous because *I’m* doing so many good things. Or it might be putting ourselves first in the sense of being primarily concerned about the survival of our congregation, or calling attention to how good and wonderful and caring *our* church is! Every church that I’ve ever served has fallen into this trap of putting self above service at some point.

Especially…the church that called me right out of seminary. They had convinced themselves that they were finally ready to serve the neighborhood in which they were located. Mind you, the church had been located there for 60 years so I don’t know what took them so long, but anyway…they’d convinced themselves that they were all set for a new and bold initiative in ministry. They even adopted a new motto: “Serving the Community.” They bought a new, expensive sign that broadcast that motto, they dug deep into their reserves to create a new position of Associate Minister for Community Service and Evangelism, and they called…me. Trouble was, they really didn’t care much about their neighborhood. They just wanted to pack new folks into the pews so that they could survive as a congregation, and their senior minister had convinced them that this community service shtick was the way to do it. The congregation was so lacking in self-awareness that they didn’t realize how self-centered – how inward-looking as an institution – they were; and I was so stupid that I didn’t have a clue what I was supposed to be doing in the community or how I could help them get over themselves and get beyond their own walls and serve. The whole experiment ended badly.

That congregation remembered its glory days when it was a well-known and well-respected congregation, and it wanted to be great again. They didn’t recognize that greatness is measured by service.

“Whoever wants to be first must be servant of all,” Jesus said. But the true servant is first of all concerned about the *other*; not about the nice warm feeling that comes to *me* when I’m serving the other; or the good reputation that comes to my church when all can see what a *caring* congregation we are! No, Jesus calls the Church to be *truly* concerned about the other, without regard for how that might reflect back on you.

Of course we know this. First Christian Church-Bedford knows this. I’m emphasizing the point because I want to make sure that we remember to keep the servant model of Jesus before us as we deepen our community involvement in the years ahead. Because that’s where I think we’re going. That’s where I think God is calling us. One of the things that became clear to me as we went around the circle in our Appreciative Inquiry sessions and named our gifts as a congregation; one of the things that became clear is that this congregation has a gift for nurturing people; for mentoring people. This is one of the ways in which we serve others. We express this gift particularly well in regard to the way in which we raise-up young people in this place. We do this through Holy Moly on Thursdays and Little Church on Sundays, of course; but also, through the way in which we are an intergenerational church; we are *collectively* raising the children of this congregation. Intergenerational ministry, where a congregation works together as one big 3 or 4 generation church family has become one of the cutting edge approaches to ministry in recent years, but we’ve been doing it for decades. First Christian-Bedford was *way* ahead of the curve on this one!

So, yes; we collectively raise-up our young people here intergenerationally. I see this when Luca Tahere gets passed around from one church member to another. I see this when Ellie Reynolds greets about half the adults of this congregation as if she’s best buds with them all. I see this when our children are singing with our adults and learning how to be a choir from them. I know this from stories that I’ve heard about Maggie B. and Ashlyn and others among our youth and young adults whom all you all helped raise. This is a ministry that we already have; and it’s a foundation upon which we can build.

“Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me,” Jesus said; and by this he meant both children literally and *all* who are viewed as little and insignificant and have been relegated to the margins of society.

Of which there are many in Bedford and Lawrence County; not to mention the rest of the nation. These are folks who lack the skills to be employed in our high-tech economy, or they’re growing-up in an environment where learning those skills is not being encouraged, and they’re falling into despair and getting into drugs or heading in that direction, and they have been all but forgotten by society. Some of them are homeless. Others are moving from one friend’s couch to another. Children, youth and adults alike. They’re all children of God. They all need to be nurtured and mentored. They all need people to come alongside them and re-infuse them with hope. The hope that comes when you know that you’re loved; that you’re worth something; that you can amount to something. The hope that comes when you know that Jesus Christ lived and died and lives again for *you*; for us *all*. You get that hope when you’re embraced by a community of faith. Our own children know that. Our own youth and young adults know that. You all know that.

There are lots of folks in this community who need to know that as well. And we have the gifts to show them. I see us getting the word out to latch-key kids in this community that First Christian Church is open for business on Thursday afternoons. I see the church van making pick-ups at several schools and bringing kids to Holy Moly; and maybe going back and picking-up some more. I see a music program in which kids who can’t afford lessons discover that they can sing, and play an instrument, and create something beautiful to the glory of God. There’s all sorts of data that suggests that music helps to grow us into the fullness of who God made us to be.

But it’s not only the children and youth that I’m thinking of. It’s the adults who have been left behind by the high-tech global economy. We can talk about repatriating manufacturing jobs until we’re blue in the face, but whatever manufacturing we manage to repatriate will increasingly be done by robots. Folks need the skills to be employed in such an economy. And folks who’ve been out of work and are deep into despair need to relearn the soft skills of showing-up on time, being accountable, being trustworthy, not quitting the first time that something doesn’t go well. Employers in Southern Indiana are crying for workers who have both these soft skills and the hard skills. In fact, if you have the soft skills they’ll teach you the hard skills. In Dubois County, for example, at any given time employers have 800 to 1000 positions that are unfilled because they can’t find enough people with the skills they need. We’re still gathering parallel figures for Lawrence County, but there’re probably at least a couple of hundred unfilled positions here at any given time.

The Church can teach people those soft skills. We’re doing it already with our children and youth; we can do it adults as well. *This* church – this welcoming community that knows so well how to nurture God’s children – can live out it’s call to service by coming alongside those who have been all but forgotten by respectable society and mentor them back into the authentic life – the abundant life – that Jesus came to give everyone. I’m not clear how exactly we’re going to connect with those children, youth and adults who need such mentoring, but where there’s a will, there’s a way. Sometimes they just walk right in.

When God has called the Church to a particular ministry, God finds a way to make it happen. So we can do this. We’re already doing some of this. And we can grow the church in the process.

There was a time when this church – and many other churches – wanted to attract the respectable people of the community: the bankers, the lawyers, the well-educated and successful folk. And there was a time when this church in particular did a pretty good job of that. And that’s okay. Everyone needs to hear and experience the good news of God’s love: respectable people and neglected people alike. But remember this: greatness in God’s Realm is defined not by the glow of the company you keep, but by living a life of service. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes…the One who sent me.” This is the servant ministry for which we have been gifted and equipped and to which – I believe – we have been called. Amen.