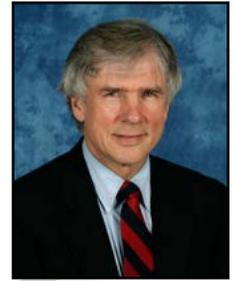




Hear the Word

from Pastor Timothy T. Weber



Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send

Eighteenth Sunday of Advent

September 23, 2018

Revisiting Greatness in the Light of Gracefulness

Mark 9:30-37

What do we have in common with the Kawanis Club, the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, Big Brother/Big Sisters of Puget Sound, Cancer Lifeline, and so on? We have a mission to do good in the world. We have energetic programs. We are inspired by a purpose and a past. We have some degree of passion. We get together and most of the time enjoy each other. Lots of similarities...so what's the difference between these groups? Maybe simply the logo, different branding? From the outside, there may appear to be little difference except for team jerseys. What, then, is really the difference? Logo Christianity is simply just another social group of good people, resting on Christian stories, praying for energy, serving the world. If this is it, we are cooked.

The community of faith is not simply a group motivated into mission for social betterment. Being born into God's world is surgical—it's about becoming a new creation, a summons into an alternative reality, a life of dying to the prevailing rules of this world, a dismantling of all the flimsy illusions that prop us up, the singing of fresh new songs of life in a world where the noise tries to drown out the music of God's miracles. Logo Christianity is not the Living Faith by any means. Our Gospel lesson from Mark 9 gives us a picture of what Karl Barth called "This strange new world of the Bible."

In these seven verses of Mark 9, we read that Jesus' disciples are in an argument. With great passion, they are arguing about who amongst them is the greatest? Who tops the food chain? Who is better? Who matters more? These questions bug us, disturb us, drive us, seduce us, capture us—how to be good, how to be better, how to win, how to come out with good numbers, how to stay in and not let go, how to get to the top, how to get chosen. Our dreams and drives, our aspiration and perspiration, our money and our madness all are dedicated to these questions in one way or the other. We do not realize how much we are imprisoned in a world that runs by these dominant rules. Climbing up the ladder of whatever we define as success is built into the marrow of our bones, the corpuscles of our blood, our tears, our worries. And we all know how our life labors in building our body of work can so easily collapse, suddenly. In favor one day, gone the next. When the disciples argue about rank and perks, first and last, they tap into the fabric of our daily lives.

Let's look at one of the most obvious cultural fascinations of greatness-- the Guinness Book of World Records. Some records may never be broken—what a feeling to be on top of the world. For example, Michael Phelps, the swimmer—28 Olympic medals, 23 of them gold medals. Or Roy Sullivan, struck by lightning 7 times from 1942 to 1977, surviving all of them. Or Nadya Suleman—in 2009 giving a C-section birth to 8 children at one time—6 boys and 2 girls all surviving. These are impressive displays of greatness.

The quest for greatness invades our organizations. Jim Collins wrote the book, “Good to Great” about companies that excel. He begins his book with this critique: “Good is the enemy of the great, and that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great.” Essentially, just being good is inadequate, good is really underachieving, good is settling for less. Think of the implications of living in a world where good is essentially inadequate because it could be better. You are asked to complete a customer satisfaction survey and are told if it’s less than a 10, it’s considered a failure, all or nothing. Customer satisfaction surveys rule the world and they dispense blessings and curses, promotions and terminations. We have just begun the school year. Think of all the students, all the parents, all the teachers, all the coaches who are beginning seasons and semesters. As Winston Churchill said, all this will require “blood, sweat, and tears.” All will be measured over and over. And parents believe they are measured by how their children are measured. The race is on. Score better, do better, win, succeed, get the trophy, get the award, simply survive, work hard to get into this school or that program, few are chosen/many rejected, competition is tight, many will not achieve their numbers. The virus deepens as many wonder if they can keep it up. Often its difficult to listen to others tell tales of their success; its easy to conclude we have somehow failed. The virus deepens. I listen to so many people, retiring, leaving their jobs, moving on, sad, discouraged because all they have done, worked for, contributed with heart and sweat over the years seems to have been quickly forgotten or minimized, as if all their good work hardly mattered. We can feel so small in spite of all we thought we did.

I want to make one thing clear: We have been granted one life by God our creator, and we are called to grow, to develop, skills, to learn, to evolve, to do well. These aspirations should be part of the responsible life. But when we take what is good and turn it into a god, that which is dominant in our lives and all consuming, then that’s a much different story. The problem is that we live in a world dominated by measuring and improving and success. We are validated or condemned by these gods. And this kind of empire can consume us and suffocate our joy and choke our compassion in ways we never imagined.

It’s worse than we thought. Notice, the writer Mark doesn’t simply says the disciples were “discussing” who is great. Rather they were “arguing” who is greater. Our competitive blood, envy, jealousy are easily jacked up in this kind of world. Henri Nouwen writes about how the world of competition can easily squeeze out hearts of compassion. Think about holiday planning—families can easily get reved up when adult children chose to go somewhere else. Who is included in family gatherings, who is left out, who is top, who is forgotten? Who got the more expensive wedding? Who gets the perks? Who gets the scraps? Political discussions are less about policies, and more about the stupidity or immorality of the other’s position—one up, one down. In 1991 in Texas, a mother named Wanda hired a hitman to kill the rival of her daughter who was competing for a cheerleading position against her daughter. The virus in the empire of greatness dangerously sinks its claws into our souls.

It’s a repeated Biblical theme. The first murder in the Bible recorded in Genesis is about envy—one brother, Abel, favored over brother Cain. Cain could not stand being one down and so he kills his brother. Later in the book of Genesis, there are two twin brothers, Esau and Jacob. Esau is destined to inherit the birthright, but the mother, Rebecca likes Jacob better and plots a plan with him to steal the birthright, tricking the dad Jacob. They pull it off and we are told, “From that time on, Esau hated Jacob.” Then there is the well known story of Joseph and his beautiful technicolor dreamcoat, given to him by his dad. The favored one stirs up hate in his 11 brothers who then sell him to Egyptian slave traders, and tell the weeping father that Joseph was killed by an animal. Later in 1 Samuel we hear how King Saul hates how the young upstart David is a celebrated hero because of his wartime success, while the experienced leader Saul has only a little applause. And then Saul has one mission—to destroy his competitor.

There are so many dramas like these over all time because this drama describes the deathly disease of the dominant culture...a world that seeks to command our own little worlds. This is the world of MEASURING—where our value is a function of some kind of rank—how much we are wanted, how deeply do others desire us, how much we are credited and celebrated, what position we hold, where we stand in the race, how right we are and how wrong the other is, who is a threat. No one is exempt from this virus. We live and breathe this empire.

The writer Mark tells us that Jesus overhears the disciples arguing and asks them about it. They are silent, perhaps ashamed. Their passions have been poisoned by the pettiness of this world, by the god of greatness. They have been seduced into the snare of jealousy and envy, hijacked by the game of this empire that has little room for deep love, compassion for the neighbor, the beauty of grace. But Jesus invites them into another world, a more sparkling world that elevates the preciousness of our humanity. Jesus has summoned them into this kingdom of God that offers a fresh new life where nonpersons are lifted up in love into real persons. Jesus has promised them a world in which the failures and rankings of the past are overcome by a hope that offers forgiveness and new beginnings. These are the different passions and pursuits in the new world of the God of grace.

And there is also suffering here, not because suffering is good in itself. This is a mistaken notion in Christianity. Suffering doesn't have an inherent value in itself. It's not another "badge of greatness." Suffering is the byproduct when one refuses the claims of the dominant culture where measuring and ranking are the sources of validation and blessing. Suffering comes when God's people act with the boldness of grace, embracing those who have failed the ranking scale. Suffering comes as a byproduct when compassion transcends competition as the core creed. Here in Mark, Jesus is forecasting his death with the disciples. No wonder they want to run. We dilute the power of Jesus' death if we simply recite the creedal conclusion—"he died for our sins." That's like reading sheet music and not listening to the concert. Listen to the music of the crucifixion: Jesus was killed because he lived out an alternative reality that nullified the values of the dominant culture's obsession with measuring and rank. Jesus was killed because he offended the ruling class-- his inclusiveness—inviting in the outcasts, unfit ones, diverse, different, unacceptable who had not achieved proper rank and status. Jesus was killed because the rules of right behavior became less important than expanding the borders of love to the unforgiveable and unlovable and those who did not earn it. In one sentence, Jesus was killed because he refused to accept the conditions of the dying world that had perverted the beauty of God's creation.

No wonder the disciples were afraid of this powerful, upsetting, suffering, brand new world that Jesus was uncorking. So they, like we often do, surrender to the dead and predictable world we already know and can regulate. New engaging and dangerous possibilities will rise out of prayers when we listen to the voice of God's shocking surprises and upsetting commands. But all this is too much for those who rely on their own skill and own will. This is idolatry of the self and we all carry this disease. On the night Jesus was betrayed, the night of the Last Supper, it is rumored that the disciples were expecting an awards banquet. Instead, he washed their feet as the cross awaited. The rules of the empire that surrounds us are built on MEASURING—who is up, who is down, who is in, who is out, who is better and who is not, who wins and who loses. The spirit of God's world is powered not by MEASURING, BUT BY TREASURING. It is not the body of our work that counts, but the body of Christ that matters. Measuring is the body of our work. Treasuring is the body of Christ—taken, broken, given to us with the deepest, unending, never-stopping love—the greatest treasure of them all, the treasure that is the purest source of our every breath, the treasure not built on résumé but redemption, the treasure that is with us no matter what, the treasure that enables us to love when love is impossible, the treasure that loves us into loving, a treasure that plays the music of beauty that will not be silenced by the deathly noise of this world.

To make all this more real, Jesus grabs a child near him, lifts the child in front of the disciples and essentially says—this is your model for living. Now that would be a problem in that time since

children were essentially worthless, nonpersons. One-third of them died at birth. Two-thirds of the children died before the age of 16. And, in short, they weren't really useful until they could work. They had no status, were completely fragile, totally dependent. So, then, what was his point? Exactly that—life in the kingdom of God is not what we make for ourselves, but what we are given by the God of all creation. This child is fully aware and supremely joyful that life is given and, moreso, that all of life comes to us in a position of dependency. The grace of God doesn't simply empower us—that cheapens the surgical revolution in the kingdom of grace. We are not simply empowered. Rather we are claimed, delusions destroyed, spirit replaced, imagination restored, made new creations, grave stones blown apart by the laser knife of hope. We are loved into loving. This is a take over, not a simple fill up at the Gospel gas station. This is a new creation and we are not the creator. We are loved into loving, like a little child.

I conclude with a simple story, recently in the public press, that magnifies the suffering when, in this world of measuring, we don't measure up and are hopeless. And what happens when God's breath of simple grace whispers.

A young man named Chris remembers the two times he wanted to end his life—once in his teens and then in his 20s. He had been on and off medication through his years, had used therapy and prayer, felt judged, not understood, was angry and guilty because he was failing in the world of measurement, struggling to achieve, lost and lower than his peers.

Reflecting, he said: "There were certainly times when life had become difficult, but I couldn't put my finger on what truly caused the feelings of wanting to die. When asked, "Why?" the only answer I could think of was that it simply felt like the inevitable ending. I hadn't experienced any extreme loss, I wasn't being bullied or abused. Nobody was dying of illness. I was not in any financial crisis. I had a job, and I had not been recently heartbroken. But I felt extreme loneliness during those times. I had no hunger for life because I felt like life had no hunger for me. I did not believe in true happiness because I wasn't good enough to deserve it. My days were filled with silent pain.

Then one morning on a cold February day, this young man wrote a suicide note, thanking his family for his life, recalled fond memories, and experiences he had appreciated, concluding with the words, "I want you to know that I am so happy. But I am so lonely." And then out of nowhere came a phone call. It was Chris' father. Chris had not spoken with his father in over 10 years, but his father had heard of his despair. His father shared with him what it had been like during the father's loneliest time in his life, how he lost his family due to alcohol, how his business had failed and he fell into isolation and shame. Chris said his father was not upset with him, did not judge him, didn't try to solve Chris' issues. And then his father said words that for Chris "changed everything." "My son, you are never alone. I will sit here with you. And we will sit here together for as long as we have to. There's no place else we need to be right now but here." Chris was in tears and cried for about 20 minutes on the phone. His father then said, "Whenever you're ready, we're going to stand up and walk back into life and find out what happens next... together. OK?"

The God of grace at work through Chris' father—out of the blue, unexpected, impossible. The vulnerability of the father compassionately reaching out to the vulnerability of his son. Both father and son failed in the measuring world in several way, but they found each other in the treasuring of God's grace, the quiet whisper of care, the gentle touch of presence, the assurance of walking with each other into the uncertain future. This was new life at the graveside for both the son and the father. May the treasure of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us forever and for now. Amen.