

Of Wisdom and Greatness

James 3: 13-4:3, 7-8

Mark 9:30-37

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James 3: 13-4:3, 7-8

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

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

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Veronica Mackey Hulick was just 20 when she joined the Navy WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] during WWII. She and about 1500 other smart young women worked for hours at the monotonous, tedious job of wiring red, yellow, green, and blue wire to tiny wheels. Much later they discovered they had helped build a set of Navy computers referred to as "the Bombe," even though the word "computer" had not yet been introduced into the American vocabulary.

In time the group was transferred to Washington D.C., where they were all sworn to secrecy with the literal consequence of being shot if they leaked any information about their project.

It took about 500 women each shift to run the 120 computers that they had helped to build. When they got a printout from a computer, they could not read it. They ripped off the printout, knocked on a door at the end of the room, and gave it to a hand that came out only long enough to grab the paper.

When the war was over, each young woman was taken into an office and had to swear on the Bible that she would never talk about their work. They were each given a letter instructing future employers not to ask about their activities during the war.

It took 50 years for these women to learn of their noble efforts to end the war. In 1994, 80 of these women gathered in Dayton, Ohio for a reunion. It was only then that a Navy historian told them about the fruits of their labor. They had been responsible for sinking between 750 and 800 German U-boats. They had helped to shorten the war by one or maybe even two years and had saved countless lives. Veronica was thrilled to at last be able to tell of her work during the war, but grieved for those ladies who died never knowing the huge role they had played in the war effort.

About the experience, Veronica wrote: "...It was a different time in our history. We were patriotic, disciplined, caring, and just so thrilled to know we were doing something special to help end the war. We never sought recognition. I always thought of us as the unsung heroines of WWII." Their once secret servanthood was shared and celebrated in a book by Tom Brokaw, *"The Greatest Generation Speaks."**

Believing that the generation born in the 1900s to the 1920s, who persevered through the difficult times brought on by economic stress and war created an entire generation that not only knew how to withstand hardship but built a better world because of it, Brokaw believes that this generation is the greatest ever produced by society. Bravery, sacrifice, humility, a strong work ethic, responsibility, frugality, commitment, integrity and self-sacrifice are hallmark characteristics of this greatest generation.

The greatest. Jesus had a definition for 'the greatest' as well. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." This was a hard definition to understand and live up to in Jesus' time, just as it is in our time, as God flips, inverts, and challenges our meaning, our understanding, of greatness.

Greatness is not found in what we have accomplished and acquired for ourselves but in what we have done and given to "the least of these": the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned.

Greatness never puts itself in a position of superiority over another, of 'I' ahead of 'you.' It is not about us and the tangibles or the intangibles of our lives. Our greatness is revealed in our service and care of others, especially those who cannot pay or repay.

Greatness comes to us when we share with others who have nothing to share with us, when we are not so caught up in ourselves that we are able to see the needs of others around us. It is acting with wisdom and understanding.

Greatness comes when we forgive one another rather than carry bitterness, envy or regret, and when we reject and prevent thoughts and actions of hatred or prejudice.

When we tear down walls, act in faithful humility, and welcome those who are different, struggling, vulnerable, in need, then we are great. Then we show by our good lives that our works are done with gentleness born of wisdom that is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

True greatness, Jesus says, is not to be above others, but to be least of all and servant of all. It is not to ascend the social ladder but rather descend it, just as Jesus did when he welcomed and embraced a child among his disciples.

A vulnerable, powerless, and dependent child. Jesus invited the disciples, Jesus invites all of us, to welcome a child, to welcome those with many needs, those who cannot contribute in a worldly meaningful way. To welcome, embrace, the least of these, in a gentleness born of wisdom and a faith that follows the call of Jesus Christ, is to be the greatest. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

The definition of greatness Jesus offers is that it lies in being of service by taking care of those who are most vulnerable – those with little influence or power, those the culture is most likely to ignore ---seems irrational and unrealistic as it is utterly counter-cultural, both then and now, and every day in between.

Yet it is an invitation, a call, from the One who said to take up our cross and follow him. Can we measure our success, our greatness, by who we welcome, by what we give away, by the service we offer, by what we share, and by working hard to ensure that others move ahead?

This is a very challenging expectation. It was for the disciples in Jesus' inner circle and it is for us as well. They did not grasp just what Jesus was all about, and his call, his expectations, and they began to compete among themselves for who was the best, the greatest, the elite of the elite. We too often do that as well, looking out for ourselves before others, trusting in the false security of what we have rather than in God, shunning those Jesus has called us to welcome in.

Jesus does not give up on his followers – not then and not now – and still offers us a different vision of greatness that can lead us to not only imagine but to work towards a whole different world.

Our gospel passage began with the words, "They went on from there and passed through Galilee." The road the disciples are traveling with Jesus when they argue about who is the greatest is the road to Jerusalem. Even as the disciples do not understand or accept what he has been saying about his future betrayal, suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus was walking the road to Jerusalem and the cross, ready and willing to sacrifice everything for them, for us.

To the disciples that day in Capernaum, to the congregation worshipping here today, Jesus sat down and said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Amen.

Tom Brokaw, "The Greatest Generation Speaks." pp. 39-41. New York: Random House, 1999.