18th Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 20) - Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

*The Greatest Among Us Are Servants*

INTRODUCTION - Who are the great people of our time?

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(Wait for responses)

What are the traits held in common, of the various people that we just named?

SITUATION - The Disciples’ Argument

Jesus had a developed a habit. We might call it deep listening. He was walking along with his disciples, as they often did. Probably they spread out as they were walking. He noticed that they were in an animated discussion about something. Perhaps he only heard snippets of the conversation. When they arrived in Capernaum, he asked them about it.

“What were you arguing about on the way?”

No one answered. Not even Peter. Mark writes, “But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” Jesus had definitely heard part of their conversation, for he sat down, called them all around, and said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he happened to notice a child walking through the house where they had gathered. “Hey Rebecca, can you come over here for a moment?” Probably Rebecca wondered what was going on, but she knew Jesus, so she came over. Plus, when an adult called, you responded.

You get the sense that Jesus was behind Rebecca, and he wrapped his arms around her, and said to the disciples, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Welcome a child? Serve a child. Be a servant? The servant of Jesus’s day did the lowliest tasks - wash the feet of the master, clean, wash the clothes, clean some more.

COMPLICATION

We want to be great. We can get very competitive about it, very ambitious. Notice that Jesus isn’t saying “Don’t be great!” He’s also not saying, “Don’t have any ambition!” But he is giving directions about how to go about it.

Be great by serving. Be ambitious in serving others.

Paul said something similar in Romans. Do you want to win? Win like this: “… love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” (Romans 12:10) That showing honor? That would involve serving!

There are similar words today from James. “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.” (James 3:17). Willing to yield. That relates to serving another, too.

If you want to serve another in a conversation, you must be willing to yield the floor, and not do all the talking. When I was learning how to drive, I was taught that if you see someone merging on to the highway, and you can safely move over a lane to the left to allow that other driver to merge in easily, that is exactly what you should do. Yield, and in the process, serve. If you get into a big conflict with someone, there often comes a moment when you must decide if you are going to yield in any way. If yes, there is much more of a possibility to take a turn listening, and a chance to move toward understanding and reconciliation. If not, well, odds are a lot higher that things make keep escalating, and there is no ultimate resolution of the conflict.

BIRDHOUSE BUILDING - An observation

Yesterday I came by to participate in the birdhouse building. I can share several observations with you.

First, my birdhouse would not have been assembled without a lot of step-by-step help from Doug Stewart. And there were times when Bill Bigum stepped in, too. (I needed lots of help! John Senger commented that I was at the remedial birdhouse building table.)

Another thing I noticed: Many parents were helping their children, step by step, exercising great patience and love.

And Bill and Doug just kept making the rounds, helping any children or adults who needed it.

The greatness was found in the ones who were serving. And the serving ones had pre-cut the wood and put the nails and screws and hinges in little baggies, long before the rest of us arrived.

THE GOOD NEWS

The good news - the really good news - is that, to paraphrase Dr. King, every single person on the planet can be great, because everyone can serve.

You can serve when you are on vacation, and notice someone in need.

You can serve and do serve - tremendously and daily and sometimes hourly - as a parent.

You can serve in your workplace, or when you are out and about driving, or here in church, or when you are going into a place of business and someone has their hands full and you hold open the door.

You can serve at the Boulder Shelter for the Homeless, at the coffee hour after worship, around the altar prior to worship, and all kinds of ways during worship.

You can serve by preparing a meal or by writing a note or by listening. You can serve future generations by the way that you care for the earth. You can serve our nation by being someone who works to build bridges, by being someone who welcomes the stranger, by being someone who helps to mediate disputes.

You can serve on a plane or on a train, you can serve by helping someone build a box or by preserving habitat for a fox, you can serve by driving with grace or by helping to clean someone else’s place.

CONCLUSION

God came in the form of Jesus, and this Jesus said, “Do you want to be great? Serving is the way! Serving is the path of greatness.”

So the next time you see an opportunity to serve, rejoice that you have been given this opportunity to welcome Jesus, but also God the Father, who sent Jesus.

Rejoice that any small thing that you do gives you the opportunity to be great.

Yes, I witnessed greatness yesterday, in the midst of the birdhouse build.

What about you? How have you witnessed greatness lately?