

**“Great and Small”  
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The Congregational Church of Hollis  
Proper 20B  
Mark 9:30-37  
20 September, 2015**

**Prayer:**

Eternal God, in the reading and interpretation of the scripture, may your word be heard; in the meditations of our hearts, may your word be known; and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your word be shown. Amen.

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Last week, we were invited to wonder about who we say Jesus Christ was and is, not least because by identifying ourselves as his disciples, we are saying something about ourselves and how we wish to be seen and understood by others. The people we associate with, the communities we claim as our own, the causes or campaigns we support—all of these say something about who we are and what we value.

I know I’m not alone in being both fascinated and frightened by some of what I’m seeing and hearing from a number of the candidates running for what many consider to be the most powerful position in the world.

What fascinates and frightens me even more is the adulation that some of these candidates receive in response to monstrous attitudes and ignorant or ill-informed sentiments about complicated, but real life-and-death issues or situations.

It’s worth asking: what do the most popular candidates in any of our elections have to say about who we are, and how we understand ourselves, our commitments, our values, and our aspirations as a nation? What might *our own* preferred candidates and the leaders we’d choose reveal about us personally?

Jesus wanted those who were close to him to think about such things. He wanted them to pay attention to politics and power dynamics, and especially the difference between God’s politics and human politics; God’s power, and human notions of power.

It seems to me that there’s no more perfect time than during an election cycle for the most powerful elected office in the world, to examine our own ideas about these things.

What, to your mind, does *greatness* look like? And what does it mean to be *small*?

To much of the world, greatness seems to have everything to do with being able to stand up to others without backing down; a sort of fearless self-assertion that isn’t cowed or swayed by anyone or anything. Listening to others is optional—it’s far better, it would seem, to talk louder and more forcefully than the other, to dominate by intimidation or effrontery.

I'm not describing anything new. These power dynamics have been described in the Old Testament with regard to pharaohs, kings and queens, and they were the same in Jesus' day. Remember how last week, we heard that Caesar Augustus—ruler of the powerful Roman Empire, declared himself *divi filius* (son of God)? He insisted not only that everyone should know who he was and how great he was, but also that his greatness must be worshiped, feared, and served by all the people. That's how ego-driven human power tends to manifest itself: it demands recognition of its self-importance.

Still, Jesus' disciples had recognized in *him* a great man—though one quite unlike any other leader they'd ever come across. Jesus was constantly inverting the familiar power structures, teaching them new ways of seeing and understanding what more eternal kinds of power look like, usually by turning the conventional wisdom on its head or putting it inside-out.

None of us is immune to the ways in which the society we live in shapes not only our choices, but also our unexamined assumptions about who is great, and who are small. In what could be seen as either a comical scene, or a painfully awkward one, Jesus caught the disciples out in an argument over which of them was the greatest. Mark says that when Jesus asked them what they'd been quarrelling about on the way to Capernaum, "They were silent, because they'd been arguing with one another over who was the greatest." (Mark 9:34)

They had sensed Jesus' greatness; they were feeling confident about the fact that Jesus would eventually assume a more national or global leadership role (which is probably why they were struck dumb with confusion when he told them again at the beginning of our passage that he would be betrayed, killed, and would rise again); and they were quite likely strategizing about who would most appropriately be second-in-command when Jesus toppled Caesar and took the throne.

We're not told what criteria they were using to determine the "winner", but we can guess that they probably included the same sorts of worldly standards that every culture right down to our own has tended to value as marks of success: wealth, beauty, confidence, fame, prestige or name recognition, positions of influence, charm or charisma, etc.

In any case, they were clearly embarrassed or ashamed to tell Jesus about the substance of their argument. And so he used the moment to teach them something about the power structure of God's kingdom, which is completely different from the power of empire and all human kingdoms.

Here's what Jesus said: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35) In this singular sentence, Jesus summarized the concept of servant leadership.

Harvard Business School, Forbes, and a couple other business magazines have all published articles on the concept of servant leadership as a business model, and each has noted that it's not terribly popular. As one person in the Harvard Business School article quipped, "These terms do not fit together-Servant & Leader." Several others commented that servant leadership "requires qualities that are all too rare, such as 'cardinal virtues'", a "paradoxical combination of courage AND humility," a "high degree of self-control". Still others observed

personal characteristics that get in the way, including “ego, that makes it difficult to ‘want to serve’”, “greed”, and “an unhealthy desire to control.”<sup>1</sup>

To this day, much of the world has a difficult time comprehending Jesus’ thinking—it is *that* profoundly counter-cultural. Even those of us who do think we get it, still struggle sometimes to overcome the very realities that were described in that article: Christians certainly are not immune to ego, greed, or desires to control just because we’re people of faith.

According to Mark, after Jesus observed that in the divine scheme of things, the greatest of all will choose to be last and servant of all, “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.’” (Mark 9:35-37)

To the disciples’ ears, that was turning the world as they knew it upside down. Children in 1<sup>st</sup>-century Palestine were not viewed as being worthy of much honor or high social standing. Because a child couldn’t contribute much, if anything, to the economic or influential prestige of a family, they were viewed with the same relative social status as servants, until they became useful in raising the household profile.

In order to understand Jesus’ point, we’ve got to grasp the idea that at that time, children were at the bottom of the social hierarchy; they were viewed as being a relative drain on society, until such time as they could meaningfully contribute to the economy or household social status.

Today, in our 21<sup>st</sup>-century western culture, children enjoy a status and esteem that would have mystified the people of 1<sup>st</sup>-century Palestine. There are certainly lots of reasons for this relatively recent elevation in social esteem for children, but I don’t think it’s because we’ve finally understood and heeded Jesus’ advice.

Who would be the equivalent in our world today? Undocumented migrants? People on disability benefit or food stamps? The mentally ill, or the homeless? All of these are people on the margins of society, just as children were in Jesus’ day. They are also the ones whom Jesus actively reached out to, and sat down and ate with. These are the ones from whom Jesus would pull one into the middle of our group and say to us today, “Whoever welcomes one such individual in my name welcomes me.”

Although it may be impossible to do it perfectly, if we are sincere in our prayer that God’s kingdom might come, that God’s will might be done on earth as it is in heaven, we need to be evaluating potential leaders on the criteria Jesus used: the greatest will willingly align with the small.

But as followers of Jesus Christ, we need to go further than just evaluating those who would be political leaders, and examine our own lives. If a life of true greatness is accomplished by becoming last of all and servant of all, then how are we doing at being small in the eyes of the world?

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Why Isn’t Servant Leadership More Prevalent?’ <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/7207.html>

Jesus became the ultimate servant when he laid down his life for us. We, as his disciples, are summoned to offer everything as well—our own lives, our gifts, our personal agendas and any selfish priorities, as well as the honour, power, prestige and social position we tend to long for as human beings.<sup>2</sup> Our lives, friendships, and alliances tell stories about who we are and what we value, whether we are great or small. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> "First in Caring", Kathryn Matthews Huey, Sermon Seeds, UCC. Paraphrase, part of final paragraph.  
[http://www.ucc.org/weekly\\_seeds\\_first\\_in\\_caring?utm\\_campaign=ws\\_sept11\\_15&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=unitedchurchofchrist](http://www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds_first_in_caring?utm_campaign=ws_sept11_15&utm_medium=email&utm_source=unitedchurchofchrist)