

18th Sunday after Pentecost B

Church of the Advent

September 23, 2018

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Greatness and Goodness

If someone asked you the question, “Which is better, *good* or *great*, what would you answer? When I was researching and ordering new filters online for the sanctuary HVAC system yesterday, I was presented with 3 options—each designed to do what I was asking a filter to do. They were listed good, better, and great, with detailed descriptions meant to justify their rankings—which of course paralleled their prices. There seemed to be a fine line between each, with complex descriptions about fibers and numbers which rated their promise to filter out dust, odors, and any other immanently dangerous particles heading straight for our vulnerable lungs. How do we choose when the least expensive product is offered as “it’ll do,” and the most expensive product is hawked as if it should come in a gold wrapper, with just a hint of “over the top” thrown in, as if to say “people who care at all about health and safety buy this one!” Is all this advertising hype designed to appeal to our deepest fears, or do we really *need* the *great* one? Is it worth it? Can we afford it—or should that matter? Do we deserve it? Or would we choose to settle for the good one—the cheap one—believing that *good* is still *good enough*?

OK, so now you are wondering why I am going on about air filters, though if you had been in the church on Thursday you would know why—because that oily smell that comes up from the damp basement after a lot of rain was a lot worse than it is this morning. Thanks to your Jr. Warden, a broken exhaust fan motor has been replaced downstairs and the last new filters in the closet were installed—all making it possible to be in here today. So there *is* relevance, but of course, the air filters are the parable— not the point.

Our gospel story from Mark this week is a continuation of the story from last week, with Jesus walking along the road through Galilee with his closest disciples—away from his admiring public—once again trying to reveal who he is, and what is going to happen to him when they get to Jerusalem. And by Mark’s telling, the disciples just can’t get it. They do not understand what

he is saying, but they are afraid to ask him to explain further. And so they walk on, making conversation to pass the time, probably in twos or threes—because it is hard to talk to a whole large group when you are walking. And as talking amongst people who have thrown in their lot together goes, they do some arguing, about which of them was the greatest. Makes you wonder what the criteria was: Who was the best fisherman? Who did Jesus pick first? Who was the right hand man? Who saw the biggest miracle? Who was invited to witness the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain? Or possibly it was it a bit more juvenile: Who could hold their breath the longest, run the fastest, swim the farthest? Drink the most wine and still walk? Burp the loudest? Whatever it was, Jesus overheard them and after arriving at their destination for the day, he questioned them about it—probably seizing a teachable moment. What were you talking about on the road? *No* response—the disciples were embarrassed, ashamed and were silent. Why? What had they been doing wrong? The human desire for greatness had been around for a long time, so why would Jesus disparage it? Did not Jesus want them to aspire to bigger and better lives? Did the disciples not believe that Jesus himself—healer and worker of miracles—was destined for greatness in their time? Did not the crowds that followed them, with their stories of healing and redemption, testify to that? And what would be so wrong about the disciples acquiring some of that greatness by association?

Greatness is described in contemporary English as eminence, distinction, celebrity, fame, genius, virtuosity, proficiency, brilliance, power, majesty and grandeur. As if there is a given cultural value to greatness—as if everyone knows what that means—there are numerous Ted Talks podcasts on how anyone can achieve greatness, if only they would _____. (Fill in the blank.) Google offers multiple lists of attributes one needs to achieve greatness: authenticity, courage, character, fearlessness, decisiveness, motivation, intensity, nobility, optimism, trustworthiness, reliability, wisdom. Who would not want to be great?

Well, Jesus for one. In his confusing, contrary, against-the-grain, upset-the-applecart way, Jesus—time and again—taught friends and strangers that greatness—as they knew it—was not *all that*. Understanding his own world’s perception of greatness—power, fame, might, great wealth, and control by violence as necessary—and knowing the price that greatness exacted from the poor and the oppressed, Jesus was constantly warning his disciples to be wary of its charms,

and aware of its costs. It is no small irony that Jesus’s own family was chased, shortly after his birth, into exile in Egypt by Herod *the Great*—a king who was so afraid of losing power to a helpless newborn rumored to be a messiah, that he had all the male infants and toddlers in his kingdom slaughtered, just to be sure any potential competition was eliminated. Greatness—as the world knew it—was never what Jesus was all about

What Jesus valued instead was goodness. Not just “good enough,” less-than-great goodness, but goodness as defined by generosity, openness, honesty, kindness, compassion, mercy and sacrifice for others. Goodness as in being the last of all, the servant of all. Goodness as in what James called a harvest of righteousness sown in peace. Goodness as of a child who has not yet been indoctrinated into the world’s ways of craving and seeking greatness.



Does this all mean that the word “great” needs to be banished from our vocabulary? I hope not. I saw a *great* touchdown pass in the 3rd quarter of the Georgia game against Missouri yesterday. I mean it when I say that this congregation is doing a *great* job responding to the needs of our wider community through the requests of our Outreach Committee. *Great* is a way of expressing those times in life when a job is well done, a sincere effort has been made that should be acknowledged and rewarded, or a commitment has been fulfilled. A good grade on a test, or a beautifully played piece of music can be great. Maybe sometimes even a product that has been rated *great* turns out to perform as promised. What Jesus is teaching is *not* that being the best we can be is wrong, but rather that we should be aware that when our desire, our craving, for *greatness*—primarily for the power, recognition and material rewards it brings—makes us lose sight of our call to *goodness*, then we will not be great in the eyes of God. When the price of greatness is living in constant fear that others are out to take it away from us, or to dilute our share of it, making us willing to allow and overlook justice and compassion in the name of security, then we are no better than Herod the Great, to whom innocent children meant nothing.

The real irony for the disciples, was that Jesus was offering this challenging inside-out teaching while they were on their way to Jerusalem. Even as his friends were struggling to understand him, doubting his sanity or just plain ignoring him, Jesus—the King of Kings—was deliberately moving not towards greatness but towards goodness. The disciples may not have fully comprehended his words, but they were about to witness him embody goodness in his death on a cross. And the greatness that rose out of his humility, vulnerability, and sacrifice, when he conquered death itself on the third day, surpassed their world’s definition of greatness beyond all imagining.

The Good News is that Jesus did not offer this act of empathy and compassion just for his own disciples, or his own people. His gift of goodness is also for us, and for absolutely everyone. And if our response to this gift could be by the grace of God to go and do likewise—to seek goodness, to love one another, to offer kind, merciful and compassionate service to others, and to stay wise and wary of the dark side of greatness—then that would be great. Amen.