

Mark 9: 30-37 Who is the greatest? Pentecost 18 September 20, 2009

“Who is the greatest?” The question was sidetracking the disciples as they travelled with Jesus back to Capernaum, which was Jesus’ home base in Galilee. It is a question that may also concern us from time to time. Jesus uses this as a teachable moment, taking a little child and sitting it in the midst of them. We can learn a lot from little children. In fact, Jesus Christ Himself indicated that the answer to “Who is the greatest?” can be learned from our little ones, whom we are to receive in His name.

I don’t know if you saw it or not but Brad Pitt and Kate Blanchett starred in a movie called “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button.” He was born as a baby but with a wrinkled up old body that was as if it was really 80 years old – so ugly that his father left him on the steps of a black family’s home. His adoptive mother accepted him and loved him just as he was. His life was lived in reverse. With the passing of the years his body actually became younger and more vibrant. As an old man he went off to sea. As a young man of 50 he went to war. As a man of 40 he went to college. As young adult he fell in love with his now older than he childhood sweetheart. As Benjamin aged he actually became younger until at the end of the movie he was again a little child in need of the help of others. It was a truly curious movie that I guess one really must see to understand and even then . . .

What does it mean to “receive” a child? I want you to note that in this context Jesus also uses another word, a related word, “deliver:” The Son of man will be **delivered** into the hands of the chief priests and scribes and teachers of the law.”

We speak of babies being “delivered” into this world when they are born. They are born in “delivery rooms.” The Greek word for deliver literally means “to be handed over.” You can picture that in your mind – a child is born and the doctor delivers into the hands of the father or to the mother to nurse. Jesus was going to be **delivered** over to those who crucify Him. The word deliver also used about delivering a letter. And “receive” is the word one uses who gets the letter. We use the same two words when giving and getting gifts. You deliver a wedding gift to the bride’s parents’ home. They receive the gift.

If you keep these things in mind – delivering a baby, delivering a letter, delivering a gift – we may note that Jesus was “delivered:” God so loved the world that He *gave* or *delivered* His only-begotten Son” . . . and “when the time came for her to be *delivered*, she brought forth her first born son and laid him in a manger.” It didn’t stop at Christmas. On the night before He died, in His Maundy Thursday prayer, Jesus pointed out that He had “delivered” the Father’s message to the disciples which He had received from the Father . . . as he was to “be delivered into human hands” to suffer and die for the sins of the world, and eventually to be delivered from death itself by the resurrection of Easter. Born as He was into the world just as we are, Jesus Christ is God’s special delivery to humankind, His letter to humanity, His gift to the world.

And having been delivered, Jesus is to be “received.” Heaven received Him at His ascension and we likewise are to receive Him. What is good enough for heaven should be good enough for us on earth. “To all who received Him,” John says and then explains, “who believed in His name,” he gave power to become CHILDREN OF GOD. That puts all three of them together doesn’t it? To receive what God delivers when He gives the gift of Jesus Christ is to become CHILDREN, ‘Children of the Heavenly Father.’”

That should put us in our place. Who is the greatest? Not one of us! Because all we are is . . . children.

“Who is the greatest,” then? Christ is! It’s amazing that the disciples over looked that in their pathetic conversation. It’s amazing that we do too. Jesus once referred to John the Baptist as “the greatest ever born of women,” but John’s motto for ministry was, “He must increase, I must decrease.” In other words, He is the greatest, He is greater than I. Interesting concept because if you decrease far enough, you become . . . a CHILD. (Movie: The strange case of Simon ???)

That **Christ** is the greatest is easy to forget. Even the disciples forgot it, and wanted to be the greatest themselves. It’s easy for us to forget it too. I have to confess to at least a small twinge of jealousy when I see the pope on TV, speaking to millions, adored by multitudes, making news just by showing up, quoted frequently. Wouldn’t it be great to be a pastor like that? Do you ever feel yourself unappreciated, love never returned, your good efforts unrewarded, unnoticed,

insignificant . . . and wanting more? If that happens – *when* that happens – do you hear the old snake hissing in the background? The Adam and Eve problem is ancient and modern; they weren't satisfied, even in Paradise, to be CHILDREN. That can be a role that is hard for us to accept too.

Now listen to our Epistle reading: “Where jealousy and selfish ambition exists there will be disorder and every vile practice” – and as if the Garden of Eden didn't demonstrate that well enough, the Epistle goes on to describe it in some detail: “wars . . . fightings . . . passions . . . coveting . . .” wanting to have, to have more, to have the most, to “be the greatest.”

The words of James becomes significant if you look at who wrote it – St. James. Not the brother of John (he had long since been put to death), but the James who wrote this book was almost certainly James the brother of our Lord. How deep do you think James had to look inside himself to arrive at such an estimation of human nature. If an older child in a family has been a great athlete or an outstanding scholar or if he or she has excelled in not just one area of life, then a younger sibling might get the feeling that he can just never measure up to the older one. The teachers if call the younger one by the older ones name. Can you imagine what James had to deal with? James, the kid brother of Jesus, the perfect one, the holy one.

But if you look at Acts 15, for example (and other places around the New Testament), it becomes evident just who this James was – He was the first pope! Not Peter – at least not yet. This James was the man in charge of the first church, the Mother Church in Jerusalem where it all started before Christianity ever reached Rome, a man who was not merely “the vicar of Christ” but actually a blood relative of the very Son of God! He must really have had to swallow hard to write about jealousy and ambition, about not wanting to “be the greatest” – apparently as lesson himself had to learn.

But apparently he did learn. In today's Epistle he uses our word “receive”: **“You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on *your passions*.”** And then James goes on to describe what God gives: **“God gives grace . . . grace to the *humble*.”** He gives more grace. Do you know what that means? It says that THAT MAKES YOU THE GREATEST! Jesus Christ,

the Son of God, did not die for anyone more than He did for you. No fuller forgiveness is offered to anyone else than is offered to you. There is no more eternal life, no more glorious heaven, for anyone else than there is for you. **“You do not have because you do not ask.”** CHILDREN ASK. That’s about the only way they have of RECEIVING . And if we have been made CHILDREN OF GOD by faith in Jesus, that makes us the greatest, each one of us. Providing we have received him, for He is the greatest. If we receive Him, God’s greatest gift, and by that receiving become children of God, that makes us the Royal Family, each of us a prince or a princess in the Kingdom of God.

And that means that your job this week is to live like the greatest – like Jesus, the Child of God, the Prince of Life – the Jesus who, in His great greatness, received a little child and said, “This is how you receive Me” – not by despising or neglecting or dominating, but by receiving.

So in your life this week look for the little ones – not only little people but also little things, little tasks, little opportunities, little disappointments, little drudgeries, little setbacks, little challenges; for they will be there, the Lord’s “little ones,” and the potential for greatness (as the Lord counts greatness) will be in them. Tomorrow we will find ourselves in the classroom, or at the office, or in the neighborhood, on the phone, standing at the sink, waiting for someone at the doctor’s office – not events that are worthy of papal announcements that make headline news – just little ones, his little ones, and ours. Even if we are unappreciated, even if our love is not returned, even if our good efforts go unrewarded, unnoticed, and if even if someone else gets the credit. Kent Keith, in his little book, “The Paradoxical Commandments” acknowledges that “The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.”

These are our opportunities to deliver – to deliver the goods and the Good News for Him, to receive and help others receive what He continues to give. To serve, as He served, to love, as He loved, and even (if necessary) to be delivered, as He was delivered into human hands for us.

If Jesus is the greatest – and He is! – then you are the greatest too, for none is greater, He said, than one of His CHILDREN.