

**A Sermon by Richard D. Clewell
FAIRMOUNT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH –
JULY 4, 2004
TITLE: “WHO IS THE GREATEST?”
TEXT: Mark 9: 30-37**

Perhaps the most difficult day for me to preach in this country is the Fourth of July. What does one say that can focus attention on the way God wants us to live without confusing it with a nationalism that would imply that we are identified as the Lord's chosen and special people? It is so easy to believe that the United States of America has a corner on divine destiny and to think that somehow we are “one-up” on everyone else in this world. It certainly was not what our founding fathers had in mind when they created this republic out of overbearing oppression, declared its freedom from English domination, and set out a better way of life for its citizens. From colonial roots rose a nation that was truly blessed yet also was subject to all the distortions and corruptions that growing power makes possible. From humble and simple roots, a movement based on perceived divine blessing has morphed into a seeming God-ordained domination of the world which transformed us into arrogant judgment of who is good or evil and the false conviction that everyone wants to be like us, God's chosen nation.

Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* points out, “The most conducive proof that the egotism of nations is a characteristic of the spiritual life . . . is the fact that its most typical expressions are the lust-for-power, pride, contempt for the other, hypocrisy and finally the claim of moral autonomy, by which the self-deification of the social group is made explicit by its presentation of itself as the source and end of existence.”

Ed McLeod, a Presbyterian pastor further states, “Throughout human history, much terror and trauma have been inflicted upon the earth in the name of God and Allah by those who are unswervingly persuaded of their own righteousness. A prophetic religion should resist the temptation of becoming in Niebuhr's word, “the court chaplain to the pride of nations.”

Fearful of being labeled “unpatriotic,” a great many clergy (this one included) have been reluctant to raise questions about pre-emptive war or about the devastation inflicted upon civilians or about our skepticism regarding the rationale for war.”

Such self-absorbed, arrogant thinking calls to mind my experience in the 1960s, when a heavyweight boxer, Cassius Clay, changed his name to Muhammad Ali and declared, “I am the greatest!” I remember the expressed outrage when John Lennon of the Beatles observed that their group was more popular, “bigger,” than Jesus Christ. Today we have LeBron James, the proclaimed savior of the Cleveland Cavaliers. Now we experience a government who acts not because it ought, but because it can. It is interesting how we human beings either individually or collectively try to promote our status and standing before others. We seem to have an inordinate need to be perceived as the best, the top dog, in our work, professions, and life experience. We discover the same needs in religious circles as well.

It is interesting that in our gospel text this morning, Jesus’ closest followers, his disciples, struggle with this same need for status as they argue about, “Who is the greatest?” (Read Mark 9:30-37) The gospel writer sets the discourse into the framework of the conflict of kingdoms. The disciples had supposed they were “in” the kingdom that would be victorious over Roman domination and were debating their relative rank as normal human beings usually do. They fail to see what Jesus is telling them about his death and resurrection. They don’t understand; they are confused and reluctant to ask for clarification. Perhaps they were frightened into silence by what they didn’t want to hear about what God was going to do in Jesus’ prediction. There isn’t much appealing in “betrayal,” or “being killed.” We know, too, that they are not the only followers to wonder what exactly is required of one who seeks to remain faithful to Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ radical response challenges their assumption: to get “in” or be part of the kingdom of God, you must be a servant and become like this child. Jesus takes a child who in the Near East culture of the 1st Century was often regarded as inferior, without status or rights, treated more as property than a person, and never held up as a model for anything and sets the child up as the paragon of attitude fit for the

alternative kingdom of God. To become like a little child is to be satisfied with whom you are, giving up all pretenses of self-importance, pride, and self-reliance, and turning in trust to the heavenly Father. The call is not to imitate the presumed character traits of children but to accept a totally different understanding of status. The first principle for life together in the new community formed by Jesus is to abandon the quest for position and power and accept one's place as already a given in the family of God.

This may sound even more strange in the 21st century. In our western world we bank on "success" and "control." We disdain the rest of the world in our consumption of critical resources, utilization of the environment and in our patronizing outlook toward other people and nations. How can we look honestly into the eyes of the world's diverse children and peoples and continue our insensitive, self-serving life styles and call ourselves part of God's family?

Christ points out to his disciples that to receive a child is the way of genuine humility, for the vulnerable dependent child can do nothing to further his or her selfish ambitions and has no ulterior motives, no hidden agendas. To openly receive a child is to adopt the ethos of the kingdom represented by Jesus and, in doing so, finds Christ's presence in a new way. The faith of a child is not complicated; children are open and willing to learn because they make no claim of knowing it all; children have the ability to receive care and love and to give it back without strings attached. It's no wonder that Jesus calls adults to be open to God's grace and kingdom in the spirit of these "little ones."

In the Gospel writer's conceptualization of God's alternative kingdom, children and other "little people" are not considered dispensable but rather are shown the greatest consideration without condescension. He stresses the responsible exercise of Christian freedom – one must live his or her life in such a way that no stumbling block is placed in the path of the other members of the community of faith, especially the young and weaker "little people" whom Mark pictures as very special in God's economy. The point is clear: God's way does not give up on the powerless, the marginalized, the lapsed, the handicapped and disabled, or the strayed, and what the Lord values so dearly cannot be disdained by the so-called "movers and

shakers" in the church or governments on earth. The alternative attitude that mature Christians in the faith community take toward "others" is to value them and to seek them out when they stray or are misled. (the lost sheep parable, Mtt 18: 12-14) Henri Nouwen in *Bread for the Journey* declares, "True freedom is the freedom of the children of God. To reach that freedom requires a life-long discipline since so much in our world militates against it. The political, economic, social, and even religious powers surrounding us all want to keep us in bondage so that we will obey their commands and be dependent on their rewards. - - But the spiritual truth that leads to freedom is the truth that we belong not to the world but to God, whose beloved children we are. By living lives in which we keep returning to that truth in word and deed, we will gradually grow into our true freedom." Genuine Christians are to live their lives with the spiritual welfare of others in view.

Jim Wallis in *"The Call to Conversion"* declares, "The principal lesson of community is a principal lesson of the kingdom – namely, that God breaks in at the weak places. God's spirit is active in the most unlikely places – the poor, broken and humble places. The power of God is most realized at the point of our vulnerability, our risk-taking, and our letting go. To be vulnerable means to be available to the power of God's love. Community brings us to the point where God's love can break in." The Gospel's emphasis here is on pastoral care where restoration rather than disdain is stressed for the "little people" of the community who are encountered."

Today, this reference to "little ones" is of the same import as in the first century. They represent the continuing presence of God made real in Jesus, "God with us." In the church today, ministries of christian education, nurture, pastoral care, support groups, crisis counseling, hunger centers, overnight shelters for the homeless, and financial programs of assistance to the needy and actions on behalf of justice are the ways that the community of faith responds to the needs of the "least of these." Interestingly, the ones who follow Jesus in ministry to the "little people" assume a role that in the time of this Gospel writing and today is not high on the cultural scale of images. In the world's view being a servant has never been popular or a status symbol. Today there is no acclaim or glory to caring for those considered outside the circle of acceptance, be they children or adults.

Caring is hard work that receives few accolades. But this is the very essence of the alternative kingdom of God. The one response we owe God for divine grace in our lives is the obligation to love and to treat everyone we meet with as much regard for their personal interest, as we show for our own. It's never a case of who is right or wrong, who has more status or clout – rather it is a new attitude of grateful trust in God, humble acceptance of new life in Christ that makes possible new relationship and caring love for others as our response to being loved as a “child,” a “little one,” ourselves. This is the transformation that Jesus' death and resurrection (v.31) signifies and accomplishes. This is the way Christ is made real to others and what his disciples ignored or failed to understand immediately.

So, on this July 4th, may we take pause at unbridled patriotism that says, “my country right or wrong!” Rather, let us recognize our place as God's children who represent the divine alternative kingdom. May we heed Jeremiah's word (Jer. 9:23-24), “Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches' but let him who glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord.” Wisdom, might, and riches must yield to love, justice, and righteousness. We can't allow ourselves to be overpowered by evil but rather overpower evil with good. If we love the Lord, we will love the things the Lord loves. There is no other way around it. When we are spiritually free, we do not have to worry about what to say or do in unexpected, difficult circumstances. When we are not concerned about what others think of us or what we will get for what we do, the right words and actions will emerge from the center of our beings, and the Spirit who makes us children of God and sets us free, will speak through us for justice, compassion, and the support of God's genuine transformation.

May each of us renew our faith in recognition of God's love expressed in Christ and commit ourselves to demonstrate love for each other, to show genuine care for those who struggle or are discounted, and to dissent about those things that deny or destroy the oneness God desires for this creation. May God help us as redeemed and responsible “children” to trust without hesitation the kingdom way that will

overcome and correct the way of this world. As Christians and citizens silence is not an option. God cannot be used to justify our or our country's behavior. We need to point out our own capacity for evil, call for our own and our country's repentance and transformation.

True greatness describes our God. If we love the Lord, we will love the things the Lord loves – they go together. May we walk humbly before the Lord, the initiator and completer of faith and the one whose kingdom is promised to all. Amen

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