

**Defining Greatness**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: Mark 9:33-37**

You may not have recognized her photo on the cover of *Newsweek*, wedged in between actor Brad Pitt and Rick Warren, the innovative pastor and author of the bestselling book “The Purpose-Driven Church.” But there she was, featured in a story entitled “15 People Who Make America Great.” Two years ago as a college undergraduate, Cleveland Heights resident Ruth DeGolia traveled to Guatemala, working on her senior thesis in international studies. The impoverishment of the women—and their refusal to beg for money from turistas-- moved her profoundly. Along with a fellow student, she established a non-profit organization aimed at bringing the benefits of globalization to these poor communities. They established 18 village cooperatives, in which members produce textiles, hand-painted ceramics, and beaded jewelry for the export market. The first year they grossed \$75,000, and are on target this year for sales of \$600,000. The money will be used to fund scholarships for Guatemalan children to attend elementary school.

What makes a person great? Is it circumstance? Unusual skill? Uncanny vision? All of the above? By what standards do we measure greatness?

Jesus’ disciples puzzled over these questions too. After all, they had made sacrifices to be part of his band of followers—things like leaving home, giving up jobs and livelihoods, adapting to life on the road. Yet they also sensed they were part of an exciting, larger purpose. Everywhere Jesus went, crowds gathered to hear him teach; they had watched in wide-eyed wonder as he cured the sick, healed the hurts of many, fed the multitudes. So it happened that as they traveled to the town of Capernaum, they began to discuss among themselves

who was the greatest. In fact, the Bible uses the word “argued.” They obviously had some feelings about the matter! How do *you* define greatness? Bring that to mind as we listen for God’s Word in the reading from the Gospel according to Mark, in the ninth chapter at the 33<sup>rd</sup> verse [Mark 9:33-37].

In my mind’s eye, I picture the conversation. There’s Peter, always the impulsive one, putting himself forward: “I was the first one to acknowledge him as the Messiah!” The brothers James and John—whom Jesus once called “the sons of thunder”—would not have let that one by without comment. “Yeah—and right after that he told you to be silent; that you were hindrance and even thwarting his work! *We’ve* been his right hand men all along! He even used our fishing profession as a way of describing his work—remember how he said, “Follow me, and I will have you fishing for people!” Maybe then Matthew joined the argument. He had been a hated tax collector before meeting Jesus, so he might have suggested that since he had experienced the greatest spiritual growth, why couldn’t he claim the title too? “I recruited the most disciples,” maintained Andrew. “Well, I’ve handled all the money, kept the books, managed the expenses,” put in Judas. And so on, until they arrived in the city.

And it’s there that Jesus sits them down and speaks plainly. *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.* What??! Then to make sure they get it, he takes a little child in his arms to illustrate that the most humble task of hospitality to someone without social standing or status, is engaged in divine work.

I have a feeling that probably silenced the disciples. Those who are looking to be great probably don’t want to hear talk about being last and being a servant. But maybe that’s one thing Jesus meant: if you want to be great, don’t make greatness your ambition. Don’t tally up all your personal assets and qualifications as evidence of your candidacy. Instead, look to see where there is need and figure out what service you might offer to address that need. The focus shifts

from thinking of yourself first, to someone else—someone like a child, who doesn't have the power or the status or even the inclination to reward you for your trouble.

The greatest of all are those who serve. I'm glad we have such outstanding examples in individuals such as Ruth DeGolia (when I called her mother to check a few facts, she told me Ruth would be surprised to learn that she had made it into a sermon, which in my mind makes her even greater!) But many of your faces come to mind as well. People who serve, some very publicly, some entirely behind the scenes. I know you tutor school children in urban schools, work with homeless families through the Interfaith Hospitality Network, sit on boards of charitable organizations, build homes with Habitat for Humanity, visit elderly folks in nursing homes, fix meals for members who are coping with illness, lend professional expertise to the financial management of our church, weed the gardens, teach Sunday School, reach out to strangers who worship with us....acts of service that make a difference.

Our 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration provides the opportunity to widen our viewpoint to consider what makes a great church. It's easy (and tempting) to use conventional standards and conclude that the greatest is the church with the most members....who broadcast their worship on television...who attract attention and buzz and crowds...who have the most awesome building—or largest parking lot. Even the well-worn phrase "church-shopping" suggests that the goal is to find the faith community that offers what you want.

Jesus points to a different standard, a different lens through which to define greatness. *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.* Fairmount's finest hours I believe are those times when it embodied Jesus' words. I think of the decision in 1963 purposefully to integrate the membership racially—the very first congregation in the Heights in which African-Americans and Whites worshiped side by side in the same pew. Or the formation of the Inner City Protestant Parish headed by the Rev. Mel Brenkus, and financially

underwritten by Fairmount a decade later. Or the dream of reaching out to mentally and physically handicapped adults, often isolated from the community, without access to friendship, support and spiritual nurture. Project Renewal still serves those folks, some 25 years later. The establishment of Heights Youth Club—the transformation of a closed church building into a high quality, low-cost after school program for children ages 6-18—was motivated by a similar vision of service, of seeking to make a positive impact on the lives of impressionable, vulnerable young people. Our anniversary tagline—For 90 years, a light in the Heights---witnesses to that tradition of service, of sharing the illumination and hope of the One who came that the world might have life, and have it abundantly.

Defining greatness according to Jesus is enlarging the capacity to extend oneself on behalf of others. And I believe that is equally true for churches as individuals. If we want Fairmount to be great, then we will look for ways to be of service: to one another and in the wider community. The “glory days” of Fairmount’s past inspire us to the extent that they move us to apply Jesus’ words today, in this place, amid changing realities. To be a beacon for each succeeding generation. In this time when schedules are full and even out of control, serving may take the form of being more intentional about connecting with each other; of picking up the phone and calling someone who is going through a difficult time, or who you haven’t seen around here lately. Today the Heights community looks different from what it did thirty years ago; we need to keep exploring how best to welcome diversity and grow as a truly multicultural church. The greatness of our church is defined by the quality and scope of our caring. I continue to dream of a church in which every member identifies at least one way in which he or she is actively involved in servant ministry.

The story is told of St. Francis of Assisi taking a fellow monk into a village for the purpose of preaching the gospel. Along the way they encounter the people of the community and engage in conversations, share their lives, and help them with

their work. The day grows to a close and Francis suggests it's time to return to the monastery. The young monk queries, "Didn't we come here to preach the gospel? When are we going to do that?" To which St. Francis replies, "We preach the gospel at all times; only when necessary do we use words."

Friends, our model for greatness is no less than Jesus himself. Jesus—who could have claimed divine privilege and authority—set aside all of that in order to be one of us. Jesus—who hung out not just with the popular people, but with outcasts and people of questionable character in order to demonstrate that they were accepted and loved too. Jesus—who let nothing—not betrayal and abandonment by his friends, suffering, or even death—stand in the way of his mission: to save the ones God created and loves so much. Jesus' final words from the cross "It is finished" provides the ultimate example of greatness found

not in bossing, but in serving,  
not in getting, but in giving,  
not in clutching, but in letting go.

Friends, the accomplishment of Jesus' ministry is the beginning of ours. We are called to greatness...as a servant church following our servant leader. If Jesus is to be believed, our infant oasis is every bit as important as the communion table; our Sunday School as our worship service; the noisy children who inhabit our building on weekday mornings at the co-op preschool and on weekday afternoons at Open Doors just as dear as the most esteemed elder.

What makes a church great? Look for the serving one, doing the work of Jesus, doing the work of love.

TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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