

Scripture: Mark 9:30-37

Sermon Title: "Title or Tenderness?"

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In the world today, we are able to celebrate the greatness that surrounds us in many different ways. Through awards given, special recognitions offered, or even banquets thrown in honor of somebody, we can celebrate greatness – we can celebrate the blessings that people are in our lives, in the work of our communities, and, even if only in a small way, the betterment of the world. Yet, it need not be an extravagant affair to honor the people around us – we obviously can't throw a banquet for everyone whom we appreciate so deeply. For greatness can be celebrated by something as simple as a mug. I'm sure we all have seen them. Coffee mugs bearing the title of "World's Greatest" or "World's Best". Maybe it's "World's Greatest Dad" or "World's Greatest Mom". There are of course options for all family members and for any of the special people in our lives. You can find "World's Greatest Boss" mugs. My Great Uncle who was a pastor was given a "World's Best Pastor" mug at some point by someone in the church he served. In fact, the options for such celebratory mugs of greatness are really endless because there are many place that you can go, especially with just a quick search online, to get one printed up special for any of the greatest people in your life bearing whatever message you deem appropriate.

Now, while some may find such trinkets perhaps a little cheesy perhaps, it can be a sign of honor, respect, and thanksgiving for the people who enrich our lives. However, the thing about these mugs or similar items bearing the title of "World's Greatest" or "World's Best" is that they lose their power, they lose their meaning, if you buy one for yourself. Think about it. One cannot claim the title of "greatest" or "best", it needs to be earned and given. This is what Jesus set out to teach in the story from the Gospel of Mark.

In that scripture lesson from this morning, we hear of a moment when I envision the disciples fighting over who gets the "World's Best Disciple" coffee mug. One saying,

“I’m the greatest because...” Another responds, “Yeah, that’s nice, but can it beat this...” A third chimes in with, “Come on, you know that I am certainly the best because...” This is what I envision in my head as we are told the disciples were arguing about who is the greatest among them. And Jesus knew that this conversation was happening as they journeyed to Capernaum. Still, when he asked them about it, the disciple fell silent. A silence that is not explained but one that we can perhaps infer comes from a sense of being ashamed perhaps that they were even arguing over something like this. Yet again, Jesus didn’t need them to tell him what they were bickering about, he already knew. So he took the time to educate them about titles. A title of greatest according to Jesus is not one that you can claim as your own. But it is earned from a place of humility and a place of service. When Jesus brings a little child in his arms into the midst of the disciples, he shows them what it means to be greatest. For while the societal norms of the time would rank these male disciples gathered around as being above a child in the hierarchy of social standing, Jesus tells us that it is not about being above. Being the greatest is not clamoring for the top of the social pyramid, an image in and of itself which conveys pushing others down to succeed at your goal of being on top. Rather being the greatest is going to the bottom and helping to lift others up. In fact, the title of greatest as defined by Jesus is one that seeks to remove an understanding of people being in a hierarchy that is a race to top select few spots. Rather when we start pushing people up as we serve, start helping those in need, start living out greatness the pyramid begins to lose its shape, and in time, what was once a pyramid would become a line, placing everyone on a line of equality. The title of greatest is one not founded in being on top – rather it is about having a spirit that is founded in tenderness for those at the bottom. Founded in care and in service. It is earned by the ways in which we love and strive for equality in our world.

When I think of my Great Uncle holding that “World’s Best Pastor” mug, I can’t imagine him staring at it with a smug look on his face and saying, “Yeah, I am the world’s best pastor!” Rather, I would venture to guess that whenever he looked at that

mug, that it brought back memories of the one who gave it to him. That it brought back conversations they shared and their journey together through the tender moments of life. I imagine him reflecting on the church where he served for over 10 years and all the ways that they served as Christ's church together, reminding him of the love that they shared and the mutual care and compassion they showed each other and the people around them. That's what I envision when I think of him looking at the mug bearing the title of world's best. Such titles on their own, they truly have no power. What gives the title of greatest meaning is the tenderness which was shared in their living – in the earning of the title.

Beloved People of God, we all have different titles in our lives. We all wear different hats if you will as we live out the many various roles that we play in the lives of those around us. Some are the role of parent, sibling, and friend. Some are founded in the work that we do and that we are passionate about. Others are given to us by the people in our lives. May we make it our work in life to strive to be greatest in every role we fulfill. Not by buying ourselves mugs to validate a title or arguing about it and trying to convince others that we are indeed greatest but by living a life of tenderness. By lifting up those around us, no matter who they are, never seeing ourselves as better than but rather in service to. For, as Jesus told the disciples and reminds us still today, this is what will make us truly great. May this be our goal. So be it and may it be so. Amen.