



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN!

Who is the greatest?

In the winter of 1970, I was in high school and was asked to play flute in a string quartet. On a Saturday afternoon we were invited to play during a fashion show. The show was in downtown Milwaukee at a very fancy hotel. The three other musicians and I were pretty nervous. Yes, we had practiced many, many hours our cantatas, concertos, and a whole bunch of other music. We were OK for a bunch of high school musicians and fortunately, we were not the main attraction, just the fill in music for effect.

Well, as we entered the hotel, we were told to go up on the elevator to the 3rd floor. Happy to have an elevator as my friend with the cello was not a big girl and had a hard time carrying her instrument. We got to the elevator and entered when the car arrived. When the five of us were in, my friend's mom who was our champion and set this opportunity up for us pressed the button, number 3. Just then, a big man pushed his way on the elevator and said, "Step aside!" in a big commanding voice. So, we crushed to the back of the elevator. Another even larger than life man entered the elevator. And a third man followed demanding that we "Make room, make room for Muhammad Ali".

The other girls and I were astonished; we were in the presence of the great Muhammad Ali. But something did not feel right about how he entered the elevator with us. It should have been a thrill to be in his presence, yet we were uncomfortable.

Today, most sports fans know that Muhammad Ali is called the "greatest" in the boxing world. And that was long before we had Greatest of all Times like Tom Brady, Simone Biles, where we hear the

acronym of GOAT . Ali himself used to tell everyone, “I am the greatest,” but not everyone agreed, especially when he was younger.

He became the greatest in the eyes of the world in the 60’s and 70’s. Muhammad Ali used to “Float like a butterfly” and “sting like a bee”. Ali would dodge a punch while he used a very unconventional style, with hands held low, as he bobbed and weaved.

In 1964 he was far from the Greatest. He was an underdog. Hardly anyone gave him any hope of winning the fight. But he won and became the Heavy Weight Champion of the world. Then he lost the title and had to win it back in the so-called “Rumble in the Jungle” against then champion Gorge Foreman. Remember that? You younger folks know about the Gorge Foreman grill, well, Foreman was a boxer before he started selling his grills.

And Ali won the title back. He was once again the World’s Heavy weight champ. Then he lost his title to Leon Spinks. Remember that name? But Ali won it back from Spinks not long afterward. Ali became the only person in history to win the Heavy Weight title three times, and even his critics had to agree that he was the “Greatest”.

In 1996 we saw Muhammad Ali once again. He was in Atlanta to light the cauldron with a torch to signify the start of the Summer Olympic games. This time, Ali was not so formidable as he was trembling from Parkinson’s disease. It was the first time in quite some time, that people had seen the “Greatest”. Many people had tears as they watched Ali struggle.

Because of his accomplishments, the world calls Ali, “the Greatest”. And while Ali’s story may be inspiring to many and can stir the emotions of many hearts, what the world calls great and what the Lord calls great are often two very different things. While Ali became great by winning the Heavy Weight title three times, God isn’t impressed by such accomplishments.

We think of people who are rich as great.

We think of people who have great jobs and are at the top of their careers as great. We think of people who win American Idol as great or Dancing with the Stars. While God desires good things in our life, He is more concerned with our character than with our trophies.

God does enable us to go great things, what God really wants of us is that we do His will. In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus and his disciples are on a journey, and they pass through Galilee. As they walk along the way, Jesus becomes aware that some of his disciples are arguing among themselves as Jesus is trying to teach them what is to become of Him. They took to arguing among themselves as they did not understand Jesus and were afraid to ask Jesus what He was talking about.

They finally reach their destination and Jesus confronts them. He asks them what they are arguing about. Of course, He already knows what they were arguing about, who was the greatest. The disciples were silent. They did not answer Jesus, maybe ashamed or afraid of what Jesus would say, but they do not answer Him. Or maybe, just maybe they are spiritually mature enough to know that what they were talking about was inappropriate and Jesus would not approve.

So, Jesus calls them over and tells them “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Once again, their world and ours is turned up-side down. And Jesus confuses them once again by using the example of a child. Now in order to understand this example of the child, we must look at it in context because today in our society we have a very different view of children in our culture. In Jesus’ time children had no rights, no privileges, no legal status, and no voice whatsoever. They were thought of much like women. They were non-people. They did not matter. They did not count. They were powerless. They had no rights or legal standing.

How different it is today, right, but with that idea of children in mind lets again look at what Jesus is telling us through the example he presents to his disciples. This child Jesus is holding represents all the people who are not held in high regard, all those without a place, all those without a voice. What Jesus is telling us is that they are all important. All people should be regarded with great respect no matter their station in life. They are all part of the family of God, no more no less than each of the disciples. And we are to serve and embrace people that are represented by these children, those that are homeless, disabled, mentally ill, sick, uneducated, or from the Third World. Easy to say and not so easy to do. We just need to remember that it is not what we do but who we are that is precious in God’s site. WOW.

It is not the one with the most toys that wins. That would be a worldly mindset. Jesus tells us in this text; If we want to be the greatest, we need to be last. If we want to be the greatest, we need to serve. If we want to be the greatest, we need to welcome those who are not held in high esteem. Then when we do this all it will be as if we have welcomed Jesus and our reading concludes for today, with the thought that when we welcome Jesus, we also welcome, God, the Father, who sent Him. AMAZING.

It dawned on me while studying for this message today how terrifically lucky the disciples were to have Jesus right there in their physical presence to learn from. We often think that we are the lucky ones that have the advantage of the Scriptures. We now know all the details of the life of Jesus, his death, crucifixion, and resurrection. But imagine being in the presence of God himself, Jesus to learn through his telling of parables, and seeing firsthand his miracles. Wouldn’t you just love to have even 10 minutes to ask our Lord some questions in person, today, this afternoon?

Another thing that popped out at me in this reading is verse 32. “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” We too often laugh at the fact that the disciples, just don’t get it sometimes. How often do we not get it either? We even have the Bible where we can find the answer to all life’s mysteries, challenges, and teachings. Seems we have no excuse to not get it. But never, ever be afraid to ask questions when you don’t understand something. Because when we don’t understand something, it is easy to get distracted like our disciples. Were they so overwhelmed that they cannot even stay on task and that is why they argue about who is greatest.

Another interesting story I came across this week was a story about the Marriott Corporation. One of the real benefits of writing sermons is that I learn so much during the week in preparation about different people, companies, governments, all kinds of things. Any of you that would like to try to do a message on a Sunday morning, please talk to me after worship. It is a true blessing.

Back to Marriott. What you may not know and what I did not know until I read about it this week, is that this company was started in 1927 by a young man named J. Willard Marriott. It started, not as

a hotel, but as a nine-seat root beer stand, called the Hot Shoppe, in Washington, D.C. It prospered, and a few years later he opened another in Baltimore. Expanding to in-flight catering at Washington's old Hoover Airport and cafeterias at federal government sites, the future hotel magnate focused on food service management for several more decades.

In 1957, Marriott entered the hotel industry, opening a hotel in Virginia. In 1975, they opened their first hotel in Europe. In 1981 they opened their 10th hotel. In 1995, they opened their 1000th. Today they have over 9000 properties in 141 countries worldwide.

Marriott died several years ago, but in the 1980's he was asked what made his hotel's go great. His response was, "We are great because we are here to serve." And told the story of how the employees were losing touch with their purpose of serving. The company was discovering that the wealthy and successful business travelers were getting great service, while the average customer was not being served so well. So, to help refocus the hotel workers, they created a program called the "Phantom Shopper." Sound familiar? Many, many companies have used this idea since then.

Imagine an inspector, posing as a customer, visiting a unit, and rating the service he has received. Then he pulls out his ID card. If the service has been good, he turns over the card and hands the server a \$20 bill clipped to the back. If the service is bad, there is no \$20 bill. But on the card is says, "Oops". If someone gets the "Oops" card, the company sends the employee to be retrained.

The concept is that you don't just treat the wealthy business customers with great service; you treat each and every person with great service.

If you go to the Marriott website, you will see their mission statement. Today it still begins with People 1st and ends with acting with integrity, with serving the world with excellence in between.

This is what Jesus is asking us to do. This is what his message to the disciples is. Jesus all along the way showed compassion to the least, the lost and the lowly. He wants no one to be left out. Jesus shows everyone the love of God. It is shown to us by the very fact that Jesus was walking among us as an example. We are forgiven through the blood of Christ. The love of God is apparent as he sent His only son to die for us so that we might have life abundant and eternal.

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." And that is what being the greatest is all about. Welcoming all and seeing the face of God in everyone we meet. So who is the greatest?

AMEN