

Proverbs 31:10-31

Psalm 1

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

If we are really honest with ourselves, most of us want to have our accomplishments affirmed and we want to feel that we are successful at what we do and that our efforts are both noticed and appreciated. To be truthful, we want to feel like we are 'great' at what we do! And sometimes we are. It's always nice to hear it from those in a position to know. That sense of being acknowledged is a wonderful feeling and one that we will normally work pretty hard to get. It's an emotional high to have someone tell us that we are 'GREAT' at something in particular.

Now many of us are old enough to remember a very flamboyant boxer in mid-century originally named Cassius Clay. Eventually, he became known as Mohammed Ali. And he was, indeed, one of the greatest boxers of all times. And he didn't wait for anyone else to announce that fact. He announced it himself. He not only entertained the public by his accomplishments in the ring, he also made a name for himself with his descriptive verbal comments. Who among us would ever forget that he described his boxing style as "float like a butterfly; sting like a bee!" And he rarely missed an opportunity to pronounce: "I am the greatest!" In terms of his boxing skill and his talent for entertaining, he may very well have been right. He's not one that is easily or quickly forgotten.

But Mohammed Ali's definition of being 'the greatest' is quite a bit different from Jesus' description of being 'the greatest.' As a matter of fact, the two of them are diametrically opposed in terms of their definition of "greatest." And what our scripture passages share with us this morning is the description that Holy Scripture gives us about what makes for greatness in the eyes of God.

In our first reading this morning from Proverbs, we hear a lengthy description of what it means for a woman to be a good wife...a position in life that most women held in first century Palestine. She is industrious. She is trustworthy. She does good to her husband and not harm. She gets up before anyone else in her household. She feeds all of them. She's prudent in buying land and she plants a vineyard. She burns her lamp well into the night. She's generous to the poor. She makes clothing for all her household. She teaches wisdom and kindness. She's never idle. In the end, a woman who fears the Lord and trusts in the Lord is to be praised. Such a

perfect woman probably never did exist, but this description is a goal to aim for if you're a woman in first century Palestine. Even in the twenty-first century, we get the gist. A woman to be admired is a woman who is servant to all around her. And she is at the very center of her community. She has her place not only in the household, but also in the public square. This description makes her sound like Wonder Woman, doesn't it? But the last thing she would ever do would be to pronounce herself "the greatest" ...even if she is.

We all want to prove our worth. We all want a place at the table. We all want to be recognized by our peers and our communities as people of value. That seems to be part of human nature and it's part of the motivation we find within us to strive to achieve and to make our mark in the world as best we can. We turn next to Psalm 1 in the Psalter that is part of the Old Testament and records the 'hymns' that were offered up to God in Jewish congregations. This particular Psalm or Jewish hymn begins by describing the characteristics and lifestyles of those who are happy. Being 'happy' seems to be what all human beings strive for and this psalm provides the recipe and the guidebook for having such a life. Delighting in the law of the Lord is first on the list, but may be hard for most of us to practice consistently. It requires a quiet and peaceful and content denial of self which is never easy to do. But the psalmist keeps reminding us that this is the way to have a peaceful and content and happy life. Those who stay close to the law...those who are nourished by the words of God...those who feed their faith with the word and promises of God...those are the ones who flourish. They are the ones who are sustained. They are the ones who are internally peaceful and happy. At no point does the psalmist ever say that they are the ones who get everything they want or are the ones who are spared so many of life's hardships. The psalmist does remind us, however, that those are the ones who can weather the storms when they come because they are firmly rooted in their trust in God.

We move next in our scripture readings from the Old Testament to the New Testament and the Book of James who is busy admonishing the early congregations for their infighting just the way the original disciples argued about who among them was the greatest! The message from James, as well as from St. Paul to his congregations, is: those who truly love God cannot fail to live in peace with one another. That's the most important thing. If the book of James was written by Jesus' brother, James, who led the church in Jerusalem, then he had a great deal of experience in carving out the way of peace between Paul, who believed the Gentiles were also part of Jesus' following, and the orthodox Jews who believed that Jesus came only for the Jewish Community and the house of Israel. That was one whale of an argument!! Finding a pathway for mission between these two diametrically fundamentally opposed factions of the early church was no mean feat. It surpassed anything we might encounter within the church in our time. It was basic. It was fundamental. And it all occurred when the foundation of the

church was being laid. In the 21 centuries of the life of the church, however, human nature has not changed nearly enough and church conflicts still rise. We can find them anywhere as points of view are passionately expressed and disputes can be disruptive and crippling. Those disputes can also lead to splits in congregations...which is a split of the body of Christ. That's a pretty serious action to take even if we're absolutely positive that we are correct in our point of view. The correct way to proceed is to avoid a split of the body of Christ at all cost. What so many of us practicing Christians fail to remember is that as followers of Jesus Christ, the needs of others, not our own agendas, should be our focus. Our unwillingness and inability to do just that shed light on our own struggles to follow both Jesus' example to us and Jesus' command to us. As we 21st century Christians struggle to figure out how to resolve our differences of opinion or our differences in our understanding of God's word to us about what it means to be great and what it means to follow Christ's example, we are reminded to keep our focus on God...not our own agendas.

And then we come to the gospel reading for this morning. All the readings have talked about the need to focus on God and all the readings have described where our priorities need to be if we're going to be good servants of God and willing followers of Jesus. Surrounded by his disciples, Jesus continues to try to prepare them for what is about to happen to him. The gospel passage that we just heard follows the narrative about the transfiguration on top of Mt. Tabor and Peter and James and John witnessing an illuminated Jesus conferring with Elijah and with Moses on top of the mountain. Peter and James and John are still trying to process what they saw on the top of that mountain. They have now rejoined the other disciples and Jesus, now fortified by Elijah and Moses, is trying to tell them what is about to take place. All of us know how hard it is to hear bad news. We can certainly relate to the disciples' inability to 'hear' what Jesus is saying. He is talking about being handed over to the authorities; about being tried and convicted; about being crucified and then about rising from the dead. In their limited capacity to understand what Jesus is talking about, they simply cannot hear him. They just block it out...the same way we block out news that is too horrible for us to comprehend. Jesus is talking about his own servant ministry. He's talking about his own willingness to give up this life for them and for us in order to provide them and us with a fuller life...a life that will last into all eternity. And the disciples can't hear him. They are frozen by the awful things Jesus has just said and they can move no further. Sometimes we can't either.

Realizing this inability to take it all in, Jesus asks his disciples what they were talking about so heatedly while walking to Capernaum. They were quiet at first, and then they confessed that they had been arguing with each other about which one of them was the greatest. Jesus called all of them together and explained to them that whoever wanted to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Jesus wrapped his arms around a small child and told them that whoever

welcomed one such child in Jesus' name welcomed Jesus. You see a small child in first century Palestine had no agency. A small child had no voice of its own. A small child had no resources. A small child in Jesus' world had no voice and no presence. Such a small child was completely dependent upon the adults around him or her to provide for all its needs. This small child was not just a feel good, cuddly encounter between Jesus and an adorable child. This encounter was to impress upon his disciples Jesus' command to them to take care of those who were unable to care for themselves; to take care of those who had no social standing; perhaps to take care of those who had no resources. Jesus wants them...and us...to take care of those who can not take care of themselves...just like the small child he is embracing and just like the lost and lame and damaged people Jesus has ministered to all along the way. That's our mission. That's our assignment. That's what Jesus is commissioning them...and us...to do. And to stop worrying about who is the greatest of them all. The servants of God are the greatest of them all. If you want to be great, follow Jesus' commands.

And with God's help, each one of us can be such a servant.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.