***SO, WHO IS THE GOAT?***

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Texts: Mark 9:30-37 and James 3:13-18

It is the stuff of pub debates and magazine articles, the fodder for radio talk shows, the topic of endless arguments and rebuttals among friends and total strangers across a host of disciplines and interests: Who is the GOAT – the Greatest Of All Time? Who is the greatest president, the greatest Olympian, the greatest rock band, the greatest opera singer? Sometimes there is little debate about who is the greatest – Serena Williams is probably the greatest women’s tennis player of all time, and most folks agree that Muhammed Ali is the greatest boxer. Sometimes the competition is between just two or three great ones – Michael Jordan or Lebron James, Jack Nicklaus or Tiger Woods, the Rolling Stones or the Beatles (with three of you lobbying for Abba ☺) – but sometimes it is hard to narrow down the potential candidates. How many answers might we get this morning were I to ask all of you: Who is the greatest movie actor or actress of all time?

As a society and culture, we seem obsessed with greatness. *Time* Magazine has its person of the year, *Sports Illustrated* its Sports Person of the year (which oddly was once a horse), and then there are all the awards – the Oscars, the Emmys, the Espys, the Grammys, the Country Music Awards and so on and so on, each proclaiming someone or something to be the greatest of that year. In most instances the assessment is subjective – a tally of votes or consensus of opinion – leading to endless arguments about the criteria used to judge “the greatest”. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder as they say, and perhaps that applies to greatness as well – hence the endless debates. But note that this obsession with greatness is not just a 21st century phenomena. As we hear in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus had to deal with it too!

The question arose among Jesus’ disciples as they were traveling through Galilee on their way to Capernaum: Who is the greatest? Not long before, Jesus had asked them who people said he was, but more importantly who ***they*** said he was, and Peter had been the disciple to boldly step up and declare, “*You are the Christ, the Messiah of God*.” That was their profession of faith, but what was still unanswered was what kind of Messiah he was. For generations, Israel had been awaiting the coming of a strong Messiah who would call in an army of angels, kick the Romans out, and reclaim the throne of his ancestor David. But the Jesus the disciples encountered day to day did not fit that profile, and on the road to Capernaum Jesus raised even more questions about that image of a mighty Messiah.

Jesus told them he would be betrayed into human hands, be killed, and after three days rise again. The concept that the Messiah could meet such a rude end was incomprehensible to them. It did not fit with their expectations of who the Messiah would be and what the Messiah would do. And the concept of rising from the dead was so far beyond their experience that it simply made no sense to them. “They did not understand what he was saying,” writes Mark, “but they were afraid to ask him.” And you might wonder: of what were they afraid? Were they afraid that if they did understand what he said their hopes for him would be shattered? Were they afraid they would be chided for their failure to understand something so important to Jesus’ future and theirs? Were they afraid that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they had hoped for, for what kind of Messiah could be killed with human hands?

This encounter between Jesus and his disciples is not recorded in John’s Gospel. John begins his Gospel, not with a vulnerable child born in a stable, but with the eternal Word of God, the *Logos*, who was with God at the dawn of creation, and was God, and became flesh in the person of Jesus. John begins with Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana and overturning tables in the Temple in bold opposition to the religious establishment. From the very beginning, John wants his listeners to know who Jesus is – the mighty Messiah, the cosmic Christ who will suffer and die but is fully expected to triumph over sin and death. But for the other Gospel writers this revelation is not apparent at first. It is revealed step by painful step across Jesus’ life and ministry. In Mark it is known as the messianic secret – Jesus’ hidden identity that is slowly revealed across the pages of the gospel in surprising and somewhat confusing encounters. So, while the disciples confess Jesus to be the Messiah, it is clear they have a very different idea of the kind of Messiah he is. And perhaps so do we.

In his book *God and Human Suffering*, theologian Douglas John Hall writes of the conflict between our western values and the kind of Messiah Jesus proves to be:

*As Koyama says, 'A strong Western civilization and the 'weak' Christ (Messiah) cannot be reconciled harmoniously. Christ must become 'strong.' A strong United States and a strong Christ! A Christ trampled upon, 'broken on the wheels of living,' is not the Christ whose praises are sung by electronic religion or, for that matter, in the more bourgeois sanctuaries of our nations. Yet beneath our surprise and distaste for a 'broken' Christ, beneath the skandalon of the cross, there is for us too - for the affluent, the wise of the world, the 'have' peoples - a certain basic relief in meeting the broken Christ. If we let it, this relief can turn to gratitude and even joy. For we too know, in the depths of our souls, that we are lost and broken - that 'We are all beggars.*'[[1]](#endnote-1)

We want Jesus to be the GOAT as we define greatness. We want him to be the greatest savior, the greatest teacher, the greatest healer, the greatest king, the greatest Messiah of all time, more powerful than a locomotive and any other power the world can throw at us. We want him to be the conquering King, not the suffering servant. What Jesus is trying to teach his disciples on that road to Capernaum clashes with that image as it did with their image of the Messiah. He is not the mighty warrior or political figure who will unleash his power and impose his will upon the Romans in order to save God’s people. He will be rejected; he will suffer; he will die; and after three days he will rise from the dead. The disciples could not understand what he was telling them and were hesitant to ask him to explain; perhaps they simply didn’t want to know any more, so they stayed silent and walked on down the road.

Our Christian faith should not leave us frightened to ask hard questions, to seek understanding, to risk having our world view turned upside down. As poet Rainer Maria Rilke concisely says it: “*Love the questions and live into the answers*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Our faith urges us to question, to wonder, to seek understanding, even to doubt, for in wrestling with our doubts, in trying to understand who God is and what God wants of us, in daring to raise hard questions, we grow in faith, trusting God to be with us on that journey to grant us new insights and understandings. Questioning doesn’t show a lack of faith; it is a sign of confident trust in the God who has all the answers and who, in time, will help us to understand better. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, “*Now I know only in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known*.”

Among those things Jesus urges us to question is our understanding of greatness, and the disciples offer him the perfect teachable moment to do so as they argue with themselves about who is the GOAT. Mark is not clear about the details of their debate. Were they arguing about which of them was the greatest, or debating whether Jesus could be the greatest, or dealing in hypotheticals about what greatness demands? It is perhaps irrelevant, for Jesus grasps this teachable moment to explain what greatness is in all those contexts. “*Whoever wants to be first must be last of and servant of all*,” he said. And then to emphasize his point he put a young child among them, and said, “*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcome me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me*.”

Greatness as Jesus defines it is about servanthood. It is seeking not to be served but to serve. It is to be the servant of ALL, not some, not those of higher status, not those you want to serve, but ALL. Placing that child in their midst and telling them that welcoming one such child was welcoming him, emphasized the ALL of servanthood. Children had no standing in the first century world; they were virtually invisible. To welcome one such child, any such child, was to acknowledge the last among them, to accept them and serve them with no expectation of receiving anything in return. Such radical acceptance of others is, according to theologian Karl Barth, the basis of Christian ethics.[[3]](#endnote-3) We begin by recognizing that all people, regardless of age, race, nationality, sexual orientation, social status, criminal record, appearance, or political party is a child of God whom we are called to welcome with open arms. It is in serving others, ALL others, each other, that we serve God; it is in welcoming them, each one, that we welcome Christ. Do not claim to be a Christian, if you are unwilling to welcome and serve one and all in Jesus’ name!

To be great in God’s eyes is to be a servant and welcome children as Jesus did. Far from being a powerful figure who was served by others, he served. Far from being a mighty Messiah, he was a humble servant. Instead of conquering the Romans, he was crucified by them. Yet by rising on the third day, he conquered sin and death for us and proved himself to be the GOAT of all GOATS. The greatness he exemplifies, the greatness he calls us to, is the greatness of humility, the greatness of sacrifice, the greatness of servanthood, the greatness of faithfulness, the greatness of discipleship. Rather than call us to take up arms in a crusade for Christ, he calls us to change our ways, repent of our sins, reorient our priorities, and reimagine ourselves as humble servants instead of proud saints. As St. Francis says: “*It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, in giving that we receive, in dying that we are born to eternal life*.” That is what greatness looks like, what greatness is. That is what it is to be the GOAT! Amen

1. Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, p.118 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. German poet Rainer Maria Rilke quoted by William Sloane Coffin in *Letters to a Young Doubter*, Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 2005, preface [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Pheme Perkins, “Mark” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol.VIII, Abingdon Press:1995, p.637 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)