
Who is the Greatest?

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
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Proper 20B
Mark 9:30-37

*They had argued with one who was the greatest. ,
Jesus took a little child and put it among them.
(Mark 9:34, 36).*

They should have asked me who was the greatest! Those of us from a certain era have no question about who was the greatest. By common acclamation, and certainly by his own acclamation, the greatest was Cassius Clay. He began his bold boxing braggadocio in 1963; and he justified that brashness long after he changed his name to Muhammed Ali.

"I am the greatest," he taunted his competitors. And they bowed and broke, bloody before him, time after time. I am not really a great fan of boxing, but even I knew that Mohammed Ali was the greatest.

There will always be something in the human condition that wants to be like Mohammed Ali: we want to be the greatest. Or, at least, we want to be associated with the "greatest:" the greatest sports teams of the century, the greatest companies to work for, the greatest books of all time, the greatest schools to get into. Apparently, even the disciples of Jesus argued about who was the greatest, which is the story of our gospel lesson today. Then, in one of the greatest teaching moments of history, Jesus turned to a child.

The great philosopher, Rene Girard, says that competition is one of the first things we learn in life""even as children. We learn to desire the same things that people we respect desire. We compete.

Some of us learn competition very well. When we are taking that test, we want to score the top grade. When we are flirting, we want the prettiest partner. And when we choose teams on the playground, we want to be chosen first.

On one level, healthy competition is actually a good thing. It pushes us to do our best. That is a good thing. But on another level, the desire to be the greatest can insidiously destroy us. Cutthroat competition can actually diminish us, by removing us from community, by driving away any friends we might have, leading even to violence""according to Rene Girard, and he is right.

As a child, I grew up on the playground of Elm Street Elementary School, in Newnan, Georgia. I did all right in sports: I could run fairly fast, and I had good hands. There were only three sports in those days; but when it came time to play any of them""baseball or football or basketball""often we did not choose sides.

Instead, we composed the teams according to who our favorite college team was. And there were only two college teams

available: Georgia and Georgia Tech. My apologies to all of you who went somewhere else. I'm talking about Coweta County in the early 1960s. For some reason, I was always a Tech fan, maybe because my grandfather used to take me to the Tech football games, but also because I actually wanted at one time to be an engineer.

So, when the playground split into teams, I took the Tech side. Now, as you can imagine, the boys who chose Tech were not exactly the greatest physical examples of the group. In fact, we were probably geeks.

I know that's not true today, but it seemed the case in those days! Try as we might, our side never won. In fact, I knew some boys who decided to become Bulldog fans during those times.

But this morning, I want to salute those childhood friends of mine, who always came in last. As Janice Ian would sing later, "To those whose names were never called, when choosing sides for basketball." Those losing teams, which I was always on, found something else besides winning the game.

I remember one baseball game in particular. I was at second base; and there were all sorts of boys in the outfield, because that's where all the balls were being hit.

As usual one day, the ball went flying over the head of my friend, Bob.

Bob was not the most coordinated guy on the team. Just as the ball hit against the wire mesh fence in deep center field, my friend Bob slipped and fell and slid. His legs slid right under the wire mesh fence, so that the jagged ends of the wire, next to the ground, dug into his flesh and literally trapped him on the ground.

The other outfielder, Will, seemed horrified; for an instant, he didn't know what to do. Pick up the ball, or help Bob? Bob said, "Help me; I can't move." And Will did. Will went over to the fence and heaved up the wire mesh so that Bob could slide out. By then, of course, the other team had cleared the bases.

The other team won the game, but so what? Who was the greatest? The winning team, or the boy who had compassion?

When Jesus was walking in Galilee with his twelve friends, with his disciples, he heard them arguing. Maybe there was always some argument or another going on in that motley group. Maybe they were choosing sides for football. Jesus was trying to talk about the destiny of his ministry in Jerusalem, and his Church was arguing. His trusted compatriots were maneuvering against each other. (There's nothing new under the sun.)

So, when they got to Capernaum, he asked them, "Hey, what were you arguing about?"

They were silent. They were embarrassingly silent, because they had been arguing about who was the greatest. Are you serious? "Who was the greatest?!" Do you mean that these full grown men, who were witnessing the incredible spirituality of Jesus, were acting like school children on the playground? They were arguing about who was the greatest?

Then, in one of his most brilliant moves, Jesus goes and gets a child; and Jesus places a child in the midst of his childish disciples. He is showing them just who they are! Jesus places a child in the midst of his arguing and selfish friends.

Except he did not go and get just any child. He went over and got my friend Will.

He found Will, a child, who still knew the difference between competition and compassion, and who knew how to choose it. "Whoever wants to be first," Jesus said, "must be last of all and servant of all." "Like this child," he was saying. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," he said.

The Fall season of every year can be a season of fierce competition, can't it? Every Saturday, our favorite college football teams meet the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat. Meanwhile, the Atlanta Braves usually show us both. (Hey! Not this year!) Then, by the first week in November, there is usually some muddy election occurring, and a big one this year. Schools are back in session, and students are jockeying for grades and attention. In the Fall, everyone wants to be the greatest.

Remember, Republicans and Democrats have far more in common with one another than they have different. It doesn't matter whether you are Georgia fan or a Tech fan, or Georgia State or Morehouse or Spelman or Oglethorpe or Emory or Agnes Scott fan. If those allegiances help us to do our best, wonderful. But let us not allow those allegiances to divide the people of God from each other. The servants of God gather to learn a different sort of identity from what we learn on television, or from the world's competitions.

For every one person sliding into home this Fall and scoring the winning run, there is another boy who has slipped, and who is sliding wildly under the fence, way out in the outfield. Most of the crowd is not watching the losers.

But God is. God is watching who comes in last. And God's people are watching the losers, too.

I was watching that night, at the opening ceremony of the Atlanta Olympics in 1996. I was there, wondering who would be the great celebrity, carrying the last torch, to light the Olympic flame. And there he came, out of the mist, coming in last, the great Muhammed Ali! Except, in 1996, thirty-three years after he began his boasting, he didn't look so great. He was trembling mightily with Parkinson's disease, and, of course, his brain had been battered beyond belief. In fact, he looked like a child being helped to finish line.

He looked like a child, coming in last.

Jesus put a child into the midst of his disciples arguing about who was the greatest, because "sooner or later" we are all children. If we aren't a child right now, or "God help us, if we have forgotten how to be a child" we will surely be a child tomorrow. Every one of us will turn into a child again one day. And it won't matter who called us the greatest out there on the playgrounds or in the boxing rings.

Children are our teachers in today's gospel, not because of what they say (though that is insightful enough), but because of what we can learn about service through them. Children are our teachers because of what we can learn about service through them. Children are the weak among us, who come in last, whom we serve precisely because they are there and need us "not so we can be rewarded or so we can be noticed.

Ask a child: "Who is the greatest?" The odds are that the answer will be someone who has served them. The great people are the ones who have taken care of them, the ones who have loved them. Maybe it is their mother, their father, their grandparents. It is usually someone who shows some kind of love and affection and service.

What matters is how we serve. Do you remember what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said about service? He said,

"Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. ... You don't have to know the second theory of thermo-dynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

A child of God is a soul generated by love.

Whoever would be first will not get there by arguing about it, or by winning some contest or discussion about it. Whoever would be first may not get the most votes or score the most points. Whoever would be first must be last of all and servant of all, a child, in the name of Jesus.

AMEN.

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