

Who is the Greatest among us? Who is #1?

Sermon notes by The Rev. Arnold A. Bush, Priest in Charge, Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, Tallassee, AL September 23, 2012, Proper 21, cycle B.

Texts: Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3,7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Summary Sentence: In God's eyes we become the greatest not winning over our competition but by SERVANTHOOD LIVING.

I. Introduction

Have you ever had thoughts of accomplishing more? Produced a great invention patent? Disappointed you were not elevated to the top in the company? Ever thought you could have become a great athlete? Scholar? Gone to graduate school? Or you missed that advancement in the company? When I was on the track team at Sewanee, I improved in the discus and shot put. I recall in a track meet at Rhodes College in Memphis having dreams of participating in the decathlon in the next Olympics. In Memphis as I watched this candidate for the USA decathlon team, I could throw the shot and discus about the same distance. I could run the 220 and 100-yard sprints and good mile, so maybe I had a chance. I could dream of being on the USA Team, but I did not have the perseverance to train several months.

I do not want to depress the congregation with "I wish I had's" or beat ourselves up with self-talk such as "I wish I were better in something."

II. Arguing among Jesus's disciples and today: the greatest?

In our gospel lesson today the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them. Who is number one? On page 1539 of the pew Bible, read Mark 9:33. Also, on page 1542, in chapter 10, verse 43: *"Jesus said you are not going to be like lords of the Gentiles that lord it over them. Not so with you, instead whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant."*

In today's culture and media we can hear those conversations about "Who is the best?"

The business report analysis will be made to see which corporation has the greatest percentage of the market. In the fast food business or the retail merchants, is it Wal Mart, K-Mart, Target, Sears? We are the greatest Discount store!

One of the sports stations ran a contest to determine who were the greatest five quarterbacks or running backs in the SEC. In the NBA finals, there was talk about who were the five greatest basketball players.

The two colleges where I played football--Sewanee and Millsaps--won some honors. In 2010 ESPN ask the sports writers to nominate the best play in college football during the year. Lo and behold, it was the last play of the game between Millsaps in Jackson, MS with Trinity College from SATX. In the last play of the game Trinity lateraled the ball over 15 times and made a touchdown to win the game. Millsaps got a lot of PR from that play even though they lost the game.

Two years ago some sports writer asked fellow writers to nominate the best football team over all the years college football has been played. Many greats were nominated: LSU, Alabama during Coach Bryant's years, Notre Dame. An Episcopal school was the winner. The winning team was the 1899 football team of Sewanee. The Sewanee season

was 12-0. Legendary trip was TX (Austin), TX A&M, Tulane (New Orleans), LSU, (Baton Rouge), Ole Miss (Memphis), Cumberland (Nashville), then Auburn (Montgomery).

When the Grammys or the Academy Awards are covered on TV, there is much talk about the best actor, actress, drama, special effects movie, and best movie for the year. The next day newspapers and news channels cover the winners. Who is the greatest?

III. Do not get sucked into GREATEST in our public media or culture

The public media loves to create discussion of the greatest sports team, athlete, movie actor, singer, and politician. There is a dynamic in our culture to seek or aspire to be Number 1 especially in national and international sports competition. There are many factors involved in the desire to be the best, the greatest in sports, music, cooking, movie productions, etc.

Just suppose you are attending the Iron Bowl game in Auburn or Tuscaloosa. The winner will go to the East-West playoff game. The warm-up cheers are "We are #1! (XXX) Maybe Number 1 in the BCS or AP ranking. There are over 100,000 in the stadium that Saturday, over half the citizens of Alabama are watching the game. The score is tied at the end of regulation time. A commercial comes on during before OT is started. An image of Jesus comes on with children asking Jesus who is GREATEST? A college student asked the same question, who is greatest in the state of Alabama. A middle aged person and an elderly person asked the same question. Who is greatest in Alabama? All are intensely looking at Jesus, waiting for his answer. Greatest town in the state, the greatest citizens, the greatest sports team, the greatest performers. Jesus says, look in the Bible; Mark repeated it several times in his Gospel.

Mark 9:35 Page 1539, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." (2X)

Then there are images on the commercial: a friend reading to child; a volunteer coaching a girls soccer team, a person loading a pick-up from a food bank, a family filling a Christmas shoe box to go overseas, a person serving in a soup kitchen for the homeless, a person on a riding lawn mower in front of a church sign, a person pushing a wheel chair of an elderly person. Then in many homes in Alabama, a young child sees this commercial and says, "Look Mama, we do not have to play football to be the number # 1. We just need to help each other."

IV. What needs to happen for more inside us to develop a lifestyle of servant hood?

We are to live into the resurrection and death of Jesus. This living and believing into his resurrection is also repeated three times:

1. Page 1537, MK 31-32: The Messiah must "SUFFER, REJECTED BY THE ELDERS, BE KILLED AND AFTER THREE DAYS RISE AGAIN."
2. Page 1539, MK 9:31: "DELIVERED INTO THE HANDS OF MEN. KILL HIM, AND AFTER THREE DAYS RISE AGAIN."
3. Page 1541, MK 10: "WHO WILL MOCK HIM, SPIT ON HIM, FLOG HIM AND KILL HIM. THREE DAYS LATER HE WILL RISE."

Because we have been baptized into the risen Christ, because we are here today to receive his very presence into our hearts and souls, Jesus is living in us. He is transforming our lives into his likeness. Our spiritual DNA is growing within us. We are becoming more loving, more caring, more of a servant helping others.

This is a lifelong process. I have found this phrase helpful in imaging what is happening in our lives as devoted followers of Christ.

V. Not so much HELP ME LORD, BUT USE ME.

Many of us have learned to ask God for help, Lord help me with this project, this term paper, this report, this contact. Often we want God to bless what we already decided to do, something we are engaged in. I am suggesting that you add something to your request for help: LORD USE ME THIS DAY. I AM AVAILABLE TO YOU THIS DAY.

Or this can be a prayer of discernment. Discernment has to do with seeking God's will for an area in your life. Diane Butler Bass's book we are studying has a chapter on discernment, or intentionally seeking the will of God in this area of our lives. What is God's will for this congregation?

VI. Being a servant can be a spontaneous expression of care OR it can be a planned expression with a weekly commitment.

There seem to be three areas for Servanthood.

1. There are professions and careers that tend to involve servants directly aiding and helping others, such as health professions, nurses, therapist, doctors, teachers and coaches, social workers, professional Christian careers in churches or para church organizations, missionaries, youth workers, pastors.
2. Spontaneous expression of care and love: Just tipping someone, offering to drive a friend to an appointment, writing a note or sending an e-mail or a phone call. Willingness to respond to any need.
3. Committing to a church-organized outreach ministry, such as Beans and Rise on the 3rd Saturday of the month. One cannot go the Montgomery Area Food Bank and load up their pick-up truck and go down to a place in Montgomery and hand out food to anyone. The Food Bank works through an organization where several people are committed to dispensing the food. Other examples are visiting a nursing home as a team, committing to cook meals for a bereaved family, four adults working on a team to oversee a youth group.

VII. One of the largest facilities in the city other than the dam

How many of you know where the Tallassee High School football stadium is located? Have you been in the stadium for any event?

Who is it named after? J.E. "Hot" O'Brien. What was he famous for? One thing is 57 consecutive wins in high school football.

In 1985 the *Birmingham News* received 232 ballots voting on the best of 14 high school coaches. On the point scale O'Brien received the highest score of any living or dead coach. He was born in Dadeville in 1906 and died in 1977 at the age of 70.

There are many stories of his purchasing extra clothing while purchasing athletic equipment for students in need. For students who needed financial help in college he would approach a local benefactor of means to those who could not afford college expenses. He tipped student helpers; he was able to stay clear of folks who were too negative. He treated players with respect, not profanity. For thirty years he taught the largest teen boys class in the First Baptist Church.

The book is *Hot and his Boys, the Life-career of John Edward "Hot" O'Brien* by W.C. Bryant, 2009.

Two take aways: Remember Jesus' answer to who is number 1, the Greatest: THE ONE WHO SERVES.

Second. As you allow the Risen Christ to transform you, certainly you will manifest His character of serving and loving others in daily life and in making weekly commitments to be part of a team.

He says repeatedly the GREATEST IS THE SERVANT OF ALL. So who is a great person? One who serves. What is a great congregation? One where a high percentage of the congregation serves.