Sunday, October 4, 1992
WHO IS THE GREATEST?
Mark 9:30-37

Who is the greatest? How does one achieve greatness? Who are the most important people in our society? Who are your role models? If you could choose to be someone else, who would it be?

Beneath this cluster of questions is a deeper one: Am I a significant person? Do I have worth? If not, how do I become an important person in my own eyes and in the eyes of others? How do I achieve prominence?

It's not a new question. One day, when Jesus and his disciples were walking together, they were talking among themselves. When they arrived at their destination and were settled for the evening, he asked them, "What were you talking about on the way?" They were embarrassed to tell him that they had been debating which one of them was the greatest.

Who is the greatest? Who is number one? It all depends on what criteria or standards we are using for making that assessment. According to some in our day, those who make the most money are the greatest. Others might argue that to achieve fame or celebrity status is what makes one important. Still, others might hold that those who have the most power, the most influence in our society, are the greatest.

We don't know what criteria the disciples were using. Maybe one was claiming, "I am the favorite of Jesus," or "Jesus has given me more responsibility than the rest of you," or "I'm the heir apparent. If the day should come when Jesus is no longer with us, he will put me in charge because God has given me the gift of leadership more than the rest of you."

Who is the greatest? The arguments around that question have spread from individuals and tribes to states and nations, from bow and arrow to nuclear weapons. Efforts to prove who is the greatest through armed conflict have caused suffering and death to individuals, gangs, and nations. The attempt to demonstrate "who is the greatest?" stimulates every unholy emotion known to humanity — envy, covetousness, pride, vanity, and greed.

We may not always openly discuss among us, "who is the greatest?" but the rating and ranking of one another is always going on. People silently think and act, "I'm better than that individual." And we use varying criteria. I'm better looking, or I look younger for my age, or I'm more intelligent, or I live in a bigger house, or I earn a larger salary, or I come from a better family, or I have smarter children, or I have a more important job, or more power or more influence, or I know the right people, or I'm closer to God or go to the right church or have a stronger faith — the list is endless.

And there are those who put themselves down by constantly making comparisons with others. "I'm not as handsome as he is." "I have a smaller house." "My salary is not as high." "My name is never in the papers."

What a waste of time all these judgments are. Why is it that we continue to use this kind of pulley-system for evaluating ourselves and others? We feel more important or greater if we can find someone else who is less important or not as great as we are. We are up when they are down, and we are down when they are up.

Most of our self-doubt, most of our worry about whether or not we are significant, results from such false systems of evaluating human worth. Have you noticed that in our present-day society, people are judged according to one or more of four main categories — physical attractiveness or beauty, intelligence, money, and fame?

However, according to Jesus, God does not judge our worth or greatness by any of our usual human standards. Who is the greatest? Jesus gave his disciples — and he gives us — this surprising answer: “If anyone would be first, be number one, be the greatest, he or she must be last of all and the servant of all.” Then Jesus took a child and put the child in the midst of them; and taking the child into his arms, he said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” In other words, how we treat and receive children is also the test of our greatness. Why a child? Because a little child is vulnerable and, in comparison to adults, helpless. It has been said that the final test of a society is what it does to its children.

What worries me today are not only the children of all colors and walks of life that we are losing to drugs, violence, too early parenthood, poor health, and education, but also the children of all classes who are drowning in the meaninglessness of a culture that rewards greed and guile and tells them life is about getting rather than giving. We live in a time that too frequently defines success by consumption rather than character, a culture that values things and style and packaging and publicity over substance and vision and service and concrete action.

We live more and more today in a world that places a low value on self-denial. True greatness, according to God, comes through our service to other people. In her new book, The Measure of Success, Marian Wright Edelman says that “as a nation, we seem to have forgotten that service to others is the rent we pay for living.” According to Jesus, true self-fulfillment is found through self-denial. What God cares most about is how we treat other people.

God does not judge us according to our physical attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, family background, ethnic origin, color of our skin, the size of our bank account, or whether or not we are considered to be a celebrity in our society. Nowhere in the Bible do we find Jesus saying, “Blessed are the people of power,” or “Blessed are the celebrities,” or “Blessed are the beautiful,” or “Blessed are you when you make the headlines in the newspapers.”

God’s celebrities are quite different from our usual celebrities, who are known for being known. God’s celebrities are mostly unknown. Look at the stories in the Bible. There is the lonely widow who put two copper coins into the offering box, and the unknown Samaritan who helped the man in the ditch. We don’t know their names.

In every age, God’s celebrities are the thousands of unknown individuals who are faithful day in and day out, who keep their commitments and who treat other people with kindness and respect, no matter who they are, what color their skin, their ethnic origin, or their social position.

No one ever heard of a woman named Natalia Abramovitch until some survivors of the Jewish death camps in Germany found her after a long search. She had provided shelter in her home in Poland for a Jewish family. She herself was put in prison for harboring Jews, but after the war, she finally found her way to this country and lived in poverty and obscurity in St. Louis until rediscovered by one of the people whose life she had saved. She never expected to be honored in any way. She was only doing what she knew was right.

God’s celebrities are millions of unknown people as far as the world is concerned, people who are always willing and ready to reach out with a helping hand and who never seek or want publicity for their efforts. They find life’s deepest joy in quietly helping others, and they never worry about who is the greatest. Deep down, they know they have value because they are children of a loving God.

Such people help us to remember that even in the darkest chapters in history, there are those among us who find their self-fulfillment in self-denial and who effectively and, most often anonymously, live out their Christian commitment. In so doing, they are the greatest as far as God is concerned, and in the final analysis, that’s all that matters. They also daily experience a deep and abiding happiness that is eternal because it is available to all of us. Amen.