Sunday, September 18, 1994
HOW GOD MEASURES GREATNESS
Mark 9:30-37

Who's number one? This is the question that's on the minds of many sports fans this time of year and will be throughout the fall until the college football season comes to an end following the bowl games. There's a new rating every week, and there are frequent changes in the rankings as the season goes on.

However, it's not only in sports that we human beings try to determine who's number one or who's the greatest. The society in which we live, and we as individuals, have our own rating systems that we apply to ourselves and others all the time. We have this tendency to always compare ourselves with others. Are we better? Do we rank higher? Even the closest followers of Jesus were not immune from this tendency to rank themselves and others and to make comparisons.

Let's consider how it happened and then we'll try to understand what this story from the Bible has to say to us in our time.

According to the story in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus had been trying to explain to his disciples that one day soon he would be arrested, put on trial, and then executed. But he also told them that this would not be the end. He would overcome the grave.

The disciples, however, did not understand or perhaps didn't want to understand what Jesus was talking about. They liked things as they were. Jesus was popular among the masses of people, and they, the disciples, were becoming well-known as his associates. Some of his fame was rubbing off on them, and they liked it. They didn't want any changes. How could the people possibly turn against Jesus? They didn't want to consider anything contrary to what they wanted to believe.

We've all had that experience. Someone tries to tell us something quite different from what we would like to believe, and because it's too painful to change our point of view, we make little effort to understand what's being said or simply deny it. Sometimes the messenger is killed because the message is not welcome.

We act as if we believe the old cliché, "What you don't know can't hurt you." Of course, if we really believed that, we would be in favor of closing all schools and stopping all educational programs on the premise that the more one knows, the more one can be hurt. Maybe that's what another saying is based on, "Ignorance is bliss." But as someone remarked, "If ignorance is bliss, why are so many people unhappy?"

But back to the story from Mark's gospel. One way not to pay attention to what's being told to us that we don't want to hear is to change the subject. That's what the disciples did. When Jesus tried to tell them what was going to happen, they began to argue among themselves about which one among them was the greatest.

Who is the greatest? Who is number one? How does God measure greatness? It all depends on the criteria we use for making that judgment. We don't know for sure what criteria the disciples were using that day. But we can speculate. Maybe one was claiming, "I am the greatest because I am the favorite of Jesus," or another was thinking, "Our teacher loves me

more than the rest of you," or "I'll be in charge if and when our teacher is no longer with us," or "I am a better speaker than the rest of you," or "I'm more spiritual," "I'm more intelligent," "I'm more handsome."

I believe that underneath the disciples' question about "who is the greatest" was a deeper one. They were asking as individuals, "Am I a significant person?" "Do I have worth?" "Would anyone miss me if I were no longer here?"

Like us today, the disciples had observed that in society at large, certain people are considered more valuable than others. Like us too, the disciples felt like losers at times — they wondered as we wonder, "Am I of value to anyone?" "Does anyone appreciate me?" "How can I have more value in the eyes of others and in my own eyes?" "How can I raise my self-esteem?"

Not too long ago, I heard a psychologist say, "The vast majority of young people between twelve and twenty that I have observed are bitterly disappointed with who they are and what they represent. In a world that seems to worship superstars and miracle men and women, they look in the mirror for signs of greatness and see only a terminal case of acne."

However, young people are not alone in this personal devaluation. Each period of life poses its own unique threats to self-esteem. As adults, many people lose their sense of self-worth, especially if one loses his or her job or some other major shift occurs in life.

Then, as we grow older and face retirement, we can lose self-worth because the world around us seems to value those who are young and productive. In a sermon not very long ago, I quoted Dr. M. Scott Peck. In his latest book, Further Along the Road Less Traveled, he writes, "I am often amazed at how unimportant we consider ourselves to be. A decade ago, I was at a dinner party where the other guests were talking about a famous film producer and how he had left his mark on history. Suddenly I blurted out, 'We all leave our mark on history.' And that stopped the dinner table conversation dead, as if I had said something grossly obscene."

I believe that much of our self-doubt, much of our worry about whether or not we are significant or have any value results from the false systems we use in judging the human worth of ourselves and others rather than considering how God measures greatness. Here are some of the elements of that false human system.

One way we value people today is by how much money one makes or how much wealth one possesses or the extent of their financial net worth. We confuse monetary worth with human worth.

This is not a sermon on wages or salaries. I understand that businesses and other employers must make decisions on how much to pay someone depending on the market and on how a particular salary or wage plan is negotiated.

The point to be made here is that according to the way God measures human worth or greatness, how much money one makes or has is irrelevant. It has nothing to do with human value or worth. Just because one person is paid or earns $100,000 a year or 10 million a year, and someone else only $9,000 a year, tells us nothing about true human worth. According to God, it's not an adequate way to judge human beings or to discover who's the greatest.

A second way we mistakenly value human beings in our culture is in terms of good looks or beauty, or physical attractiveness. Studies show, for example, that as adults we respond very differently to an unusually beautiful child than we do to a particularly unattractive one, and that difference in response can have a profound impact on a developing personality.

In so many subtle ways and in some not-so-subtle ways, we tend to evaluate human worth or greatness in terms of beauty. A number of years ago, a tragic incident occurred in Chicago when eight student nurses were viciously murdered. The following day, a news commentator was discussing the violent event on the radio, and he said, “The thing that makes this tragedy much worse is that all eight of these young women were so attractive.” He was implying that they were more valuable, had more human worth, because they were beautiful. If one accepts that assumption, then the opposite is also true; the murders would have been less tragic if homely young women had been killed.

We’ve heard the song, “A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody.” If that is true, then what is a not-so-pretty girl like? Fortunately, the God that Jesus Christ revealed does not measure human worth or greatness in terms of how much money we make or what our net worth financially is, or how physically attractive we might be.

A third way our society measures greatness or worth as far as human beings are concerned is in terms of intelligence.

Not long after examining a new baby’s eyes, ears, and nose, and counting fingers and toes, most new parents begin looking for signs of budding genius. And believe it or not, they often seem to find it. A child’s growth and development are so rapid during the first year of life that his or her awestruck parents watch their brilliant creation in amazement.

Only eight months ago, the child was completely helpless; now look at her. She said, “Mama” a full six weeks before the average child. And what an athlete she’s going to be — not only is she very intelligent, but she has physical abilities that are incredible.

Incidentally, one of the latest theories about human intelligence is that everyone actually has seven intelligences and that linguistic and mathematical intelligences, which much of our schooling concentrates on, are only two of them.

The other five are visual and spatial intelligence, which is developed in architects, painters, navigators, and related fields; musical intelligence, which is highly developed in performers, composers, conductors, musical audiences, and recording engineers; kinesthetic intelligence, which is seen in dancers, actors, athletes, inventors, surgeons, race car drivers, outdoor workers, and the mechanically gifted; interpersonal or social intelligence, which is well developed in politicians, teachers, religious leaders, counselors, managers, salespeople, and public relations specialists; and intrapersonal intelligence, which is found in novelists, counselors, philosophers, and mystics. We all have all seven, but in varying amounts, and this means that we all learn differently. Furthermore, all are needed as we work together in this world, and we need to learn to appreciate them.

I’m not downplaying beauty or any kind of intelligence, but with our over-emphasis on judging human beings and their greatness according to only certain kinds of attractiveness or one or two of the seven intelligences, we forget that all people are valuable and that all people need to be loved and accepted.

Furthermore, all people have worth as human beings in God's creation.

God's love is not something we earn or deserve by being rich, beautiful, or having a high IQ.

How then does God measure greatness? Jesus said it plainly to his disciples. When he learned they had been discussing among themselves who was the greatest, he called his disciples together for a short meeting. He told them, "If anyone would be first, that one must be last of all and servant of all."

So according to the teachings and example of Jesus, you are the greatest, you are number one when you are a helper to others and when you cooperate and work with others. You are number one when you are not trying to be number one. And in God's way of measuring things, everyone can be number one — there is no limit. In our human measurements, there can only be one number one. Then comes number 2, 3, 4, 5, and on down the list. God does not use such a ranking system.

To put it another way, nowhere in the Bible do we find Jesus saying, "Blessed only are the people of power, blessed only are the celebrities, blessed only are the beautiful, blessed only are those who have the biggest net worth financially, blessed only are the highly intelligent, or blessed are you only when people want your autograph."

Lest you misunderstand, nowhere is it indicated that you are not blessed by God if you have special gifts in one or more of these categories. Incidentally, Jesus did emphasize that the more you have been given, the more that is required of you, but that's another sermon. The point here is, over and over again, Jesus reminds us that true greatness according to God's measurements is quite different from many of the world's standards.

In the story from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus then took a small child and put that child in the midst of them; and taking the child in his arms, he said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me, but God who sent me."

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 children, how it treats its children. By using a child as an illustration, Jesus meant to include all those persons among us who are small, weak, handicapped, or vulnerable in any way.

The greatest among us, according to God's measurements, are those persons who watch out, take care of, and defend the children and the child-like among us, not only those in our immediate families, but others as well. The greatest among us are those who practice simple human kindness to everyone they meet.

This is good news because it means that each one of us can be number one as far as God is concerned. Amen.