Sunday, September 24, 2000
WHO'S THE GREATEST?
Mark 9:30-37

If a seeking person came to you and asked how your life as a Christian differs from hers as a moral person who is not a Christian, what would you tell her? It's a fair question. Here are some likely answers. You might say, "Because of my faith in God, I haven't given up on my marriage despite huge unresolved issues." Or you could respond, "My use of money is very much affected. I look for ways to help others rather than only thinking of my own desires."

You might answer, "I can't help worrying. I worried about my cancer, I worry about my children going astray. I know worrying doesn't help, but I do it anyway. Still, I have a kind of basic confidence in the goodness of God. I believe at a very deep level that all things work together for good for those who love God. Some call it a crutch. I call it my faith. For a crippled person, there is one thing worse than a crutch, and that's being without a crutch."

If you asked the same question of a hospice nurse, she might reply: "I see a difference in how families with faith in God handle death. They mourn, of course, and cry; but they also hug each other and remember there is hope. For those without faith, death is final. It ends everything. People with a sense of the Holy, of the Sacred, remind each other there will also be a future."

Or you might state your answers to the question in terms of what you are learning because of your faith. You could say, for example, "Because of my faith in God, I'm learning that it's not what you have in your life but who you have in your life that counts." Or "I'm learning that I need not compare myself to the best others can do, but to the best that I can do." Or, "Because of my faith in God, I'm learning that how much money I have or don't have is a lousy way to keep score." Or, "I'm learning that just because someone doesn't love me the way I want to be loved, it doesn't mean they don't love me with all they have."

Now let's suppose this same seeking person asked you how your life as a Christian differs from hers in how you evaluate yourself and others. How do you decide who's the greatest? How does God measure greatness? These are some of the questions I want to explore in this sermon.

When it comes to ranking college football teams, coaches and sports writers try to use some objective standards such as how many games have been won or lost. What is the quality or the ranking of the opponents that are on the team's schedule? How many yards were gained or lost? Rankings can never be 100% objective because there are too many variables. There's a new rating every week, and there are frequent changes in the ranking as the season goes on.

But it's not only in sports that we human beings try to determine who's the greatest. In every part of life, we have our own rating systems which we apply to others and to ourselves. We human beings, for some reason or other, have this built-in tendency to always be comparing ourselves with others. Am I better? Am I worse? Do I have more talent or less talent than someone else? Am I loved more or less than someone else? Even the closest followers of Jesus were not immune from this.

That's what the story read earlier from the Gospel of Mark is about. Jesus had been trying to explain to his disciples that one day soon he would be arrested, put on trial, and probably executed. But he also told them this would not be the end. He would overcome death.

The disciples, however, did not understand or maybe didn't want to understand what he was talking about. They liked things as they were. Their leader was popular among most of the people. And they, the disciples, were becoming well-known as his associates. Some of this fame was rubbing off on them, and they liked it. They couldn't imagine that people might turn against him. They didn't want to consider anything contrary to what they wanted to believe.

You've had that experience. Someone tries to tell you something quite different from what you want to believe and have always believed, and because it's too painful to change your point of view, you make little effort to even hear what is being said or simply deny it. Sometimes the messenger is killed because the message is not welcome.

Or if you don't want to hear what's being told to you because it is disturbing, you can try to change the subject. That's what the disciples attempted. Instead of hearing what Jesus said was going to happen, they began arguing among themselves about which one of them was the greatest.

Who's the greatest? Who is number one? How does God measure greatness? It all depends on the criteria you are using for making your judgment. We don't know for sure what criteria the disciples were using that day, but we can speculate. Maybe one was claiming, "I'm the greatest because I am the favorite of our teacher." Then another argued, "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." Then maybe Peter said, "I am a better speaker than the rest of you," and another added, "I am more intelligent."

Underneath the question of which one was the greatest is 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?"

As is the case today, the disciples had observed that in society at large, certain people are considered more valuable than others. Maybe like many people today, they felt like losers at times, and they wondered as we wonder, "Am I of value to anyone? Does anyone appreciate me? If I died tomorrow, would anyone miss me? How can I increase my value in my own eyes? How can I raise my self-esteem?"

One adolescent psychologist said, "The vast majority of young people between 12 and 20 that I have observed are bitterly disappointed with themselves. In a world that seems to worship superstars and miracle women and men, celebrities, they look in the mirror for signs of greatness and see only a terminal case of acne."

Young people are not alone in this kind of personal evaluation. Each period of life poses its own unique threats to self-esteem. As adults, some people lose their sense of worth, especially if one loses his or her job or when he or she retires or experiences some other loss.

As we grow older, we can lose a sense of self-worth because the world around us, especially today, seems to value those who are young and productive. In his book, Further Along the Road Less Traveled, Dr. M. Scott Peck 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 marks on history.' And that stopped the dinner table conversation dead as if I had said something grossly obscene."

Much of our worry about whether or not we are significant or have any value results from the false system 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 the misleading indicators we use.

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

Tiger Woods, ranked as the number one best golfer in the world today, recently negotiated a new contract with NIKE. He's being paid that not because he is a more worthy human being than anyone else but because NIKE believes he is a valuable asset to their business. Hopefully, with the use of his name and his personal appearances, the company will sell more products. That's okay. It's a business decision, and you can argue as to whether or not it's a good decision, but there's nothing illegal or immoral about it.

The point is that according to the way God measures human worth or greatness, how much money one makes, or how wealthy a person is, or whether an individual is ranked number one in his or her chosen field in comparison with others has nothing to do with human value or worth. Just because one person is paid $100,000 a year or ten million a year and someone else $10,000 a year, that tells us nothing about human worth as God evaluates it.

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

In so many subtle ways, and in some not so subtle, we tend to judge human worth or greatness in terms of beauty. I've never forgotten the news story about a terrible incident in Chicago many years ago when eight student nurses were murdered. The following day, a news commentator was describing 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 of their beauty. If you accept that assumption, then the opposite is also true: the murders would have been less tragic if homely young women had been killed.

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

Only eight months ago, the child was completely helpless, and 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. Undoubtedly, she will also be artistic, musical, and, as she develops, will possess amazing interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. All of these are wonderful gifts, and each one of us possesses

them to varying degrees. I'm not downplaying any of them, and I hope that each one of us will use whatever talents have been given to us to the fullest.

We need to remember, however, that all people have worth as human beings in God's creation because each one of us has been created in God's image. God's love, therefore, is not something we earn or deserve because we are rich, beautiful, or have more talent than someone else.

How then does God measure greatness? In the deepest sense, of course, according to the teachings of Jesus, God doesn't measure greatness. That is, God doesn't compare you with someone else and say you are better or worse. God only hopes that you will live up to the best that is in you, that you will use to the best of your ability, including for the betterment of others, those gifts that have been entrusted to you.

So, when Jesus learned that his disciples had been discussing among themselves who was the greatest, here's what he did. He called them together for a short meeting and said, "You've got it all wrong. You have misunderstood what I've been trying to teach you with words and by my example. Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

It sounds illogical and paradoxical, and like so many other teachings of Jesus, it is. You become first by becoming last, and if everyone becomes the servant of everyone else, then everyone is first and last. You are number one, that is, you are the greatest, when you are not trying to be number one or the greatest. You are number one when you don't care who is number one or who is the greatest.

In God's way of measuring things, everyone can be number one — there is no limit. And if everyone is number one, there is no number one.

Who's the greatest? You are, and so is everyone else whenever you let go of yourself and begin to serve others, thereby making room so that God's Spirit can live in you. Amen.