Sunday, September 21, 2003
YOU ARE THE GREATEST
Mark 9:30-37

If you were born into a family or raised in one where you were not the only child, you probably asked your mother or dad at least one time as you were growing up, “Am I your favorite child?” Or if you didn’t ask that question, you might have accused your mother or dad of having a favorite, and you were not it.

I grew up in a family of seven children where I was the second oldest. I remember accusing my mother of having a favorite child, and I was certain I was not it. Some of my siblings at the same time were convinced that I was the favorite. At other times, they were sure that another sister or brother was the favorite. My mother would respond to this accusation by saying with a smile, “You are right. Otis is my favorite,” or “Sandra is my favorite,” or “Doris is my favorite.” Then we didn’t know what to say. We discovered that no matter which one of our siblings we decided was our mother’s favorite, she would agree.

Last month, all six of us who are still living gathered for a four-day vacation with our spouses. As we looked back on our growing up, we agreed that our parents really did not have any favorites. They did their best to treat and love us equally. This is not to deny that in some families, parents do favor one child over another. I’ve seen it happen.

It’s not only in families that favoritism or perceived favoritism takes place. It occurs in the workplace, in sports, and in every part of the social system. Human beings seem to have a built-in tendency to want to rank one another or to always be comparing themselves with others. Am I better? Am I worse? Am I more beautiful? Am I the favorite? Do I have more talent than someone else? You want to know, who is the greatest? Who is number one? Who is the favorite?

So it is not surprising to find in the scripture reading for today that the disciples had been arguing with one another about which one of them was the greatest, the favorite, the most important, number one.

Here’s how it happened. Jesus had been trying to explain to his disciples that one day soon he would be arrested, put on trial, and probably executed. He also told them that this would not be the end. He would overcome death.

The disciples, however, did not understand or maybe did not want to understand what he was trying to tell them. They preferred things as they were. Their teacher was gaining in popularity. They 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.

You’ve had that experience. Someone tries to tell you something quite different from what you’ve always believed. Because it’s too painful to even consider changing your point of view, you make little effort to understand what’s being said, or you simply deny it. Sometimes the messenger is killed because the message is not welcome.

You want to believe the old cliché, “What you don’t know can’t hurt you.” Of course, if you really believed that, you would be in favor of closing all schools and stopping all educational

programs on the premise that the more you know, the more you can be hurt. Maybe that's the assumption of another cliché, "Ignorance is bliss." However, consider this: 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 you that you don't want to hear is to try to change the subject. That's what the disciples did. When their teacher tried to tell them what was going to happen, they began to argue among themselves about which one of them was the greatest.

They are talking like graduate students comparing their GRE scores, or high school students comparing their ACT or SAT scores, or their class standing. They are talking like ministers comparing how many people attend their worship services on a weekend or how many members they claim to have on the books.

No one knows what criteria the disciples were using for measuring greatness. You can speculate from what is used today. Maybe one was claiming he was the greatest because he was the favorite of Jesus. Or another was thinking, "Jesus loves me more than the others." Still, another was thinking, "I'm the greatest because I am more spiritual," or "I'm smarter," or "I'm a better leader."

The story raises the question: does God care about our human ratings? Does God measure greatness, and if so, by what criteria? We'll deal with that later. I believe that underneath the argument the disciples were having was a deeper question. They were asking as individuals — am I significant? Do I have worth? Would anyone miss me if I were no longer here? You've probably wondered about the same things. I certainly have.

You've noticed that in this culture, certain people are considered to be more valuable, to have more worth than others. A psychologist had this to say about young people she dealt with: "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 because of the culture's faulty rating systems. 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.

In a previous sermon, I quoted Dr. M. Scott Peck. In his 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 conversation dead, as if I had said something grossly obscene."

The point is this: much of your self-doubt, much of your worry about whether or not you are significant or have any value results from the false system the culture uses in judging human worth. Some of the factors of this false system are these.

One false way the culture values people today is by how much money one makes or how much wealth one possesses, or the extent of one's financial net worth. Monetary worth is

confused with human worth. This is not a sermon on wages or salaries or bonuses or stock options. I understand that employers need to make decisions on how much to pay someone and that many different factors influence this decision. The point to be made here is that according to how 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. Because one person earns $100,000 per year or 20 million per year, and someone else only $12,000 per year, tells you nothing about true human worth or greatness.

A second way the culture mistakenly values human worth is in terms of good looks, beauty, and physical attractiveness. Studies have demonstrated that adults and young people respond very differently to an unusually beautiful child than they do to a particularly unattractive one. This is also true of the way people respond to adults. Frequently there will be a news story about a tragic, brutal murder. One story I read recently said: “What makes this murder much worse is that the victim was so beautiful.” If you accept that assumption, then the opposite is true: the murder would have been less tragic if the victim had not been beautiful.

There’s nothing inherently wrong with appreciating beautiful people, great art, or any other object of beauty. There’s beauty in nature. What’s wrong is when you believe that beautiful people, according to your standards of beauty, have more human value.

A third way the culture falsely values human worth or greatness is by how famous a person is. Celebrities, for some strange reason, are given a higher value than people who are not widely known or recognized. Henry Kissinger had this to say about being a celebrity: “The main advantage of being a celebrity is that when you bore people, they think it’s their fault.”

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

Then by way of illustration, he did something truly shocking. He took into his arms a child, perhaps the child of one of the household servants, and he said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Why was the illustration with a child so shocking? In today’s culture, there is an idealized concept of childhood as a time of precious innocence and infinite potential. It is considered natural for Jesus or anyone in authority, or campaigning for political office, to engage in a little baby-kissing. But in the ancient world, children were property. They had no social status. This act of using a child as an illustration was a revolutionary statement. Jesus was proclaiming that the reign of God is a community of welcome. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” To embrace and welcome those of no status is to welcome God!

Jesus revealed a God who welcomes all people with open arms, especially those that any society considers unlovable and not welcome. My vision for this congregation is for it not only to continue being a church with open arms, which welcomes all people, but to improve in that capacity.

According to the teachings and example of Jesus, you are the greatest, you are number one when you welcome others, especially those of little or no status, and when you are a helper to others. When you welcome those of low or no status, you are welcoming God.

You are number one when you are not trying to be number one. And in God's way of measuring people, everyone can be number one. Everyone can be the greatest. There is no limit. In the culture's numbering system, by definition, there can only be one number one. Then come numbers 2, 3, 4, 5, and on down the list. If everyone can be number one, then the whole ranking system is irrelevant.

Lest you misunderstand, nowhere in the Bible is it implied that everyone has the same ability or talent. In God's creation, there are no duplicates. There is tremendous diversity. Some people have a lot more ability, talent, and skills than others. Some are rich; many others are poor. But remember this: Jesus said in another place, "The more you have been given, the more that is required of you." That's another sermon for the future.

Who's the greatest? You are the greatest! Each human being is the greatest! You have been created in God's image, and God loves each one of you unconditionally. No one can be greater than that. Amen.