

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 20 (Pentecost 17), Series B
Saturday, September 18th, 2021 (Oktoberfest)
Sunday, September 19th, 2021

Sermon: Jesus Is the G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All Time)

Text: Mark 9:30-37

Focus: Christ saved us by setting aside his greatest to become the servant of all on the cross.

Function: That they would humble themselves to serve one another in love.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me... with His holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death" (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. In our children's message today, Miss Kristin taught us the acronym G.O.A.T. (pronounced "goat"). It stands for the Greatest Of All Time. That is, who is the *greatest*? This is a question we love to debate, especially when it comes to the sporting world. Who is the greatest baseball player of all time? [*Field answers*] Basketball? [*Field answers*] Who is the greatest *football* quarterback of all time? [*Field answers*] Pick any sport, and we could argue all day long about who is the G.O.A.T.

We could even make it more interesting by asking who is the greatest *athlete* of all time. I did a Google search, and of course various websites, including ESPN and Sports Illustrated, offered their own

suggestions. Professional athletes and Olympians from many sports made the lists: Tiger Woods, Usain Bolt, Mark Spitz, Michael Jordan, Muhammad Ali, Jesse Owens, and many others. (Sadly, only two women seemed to stand out in people's minds: Tennis player Serena Williams and gymnast Simone Biles, even though there are—and have been—many spectacular female athletes).

But we're also obsessed with trying to be the G.O.A.T.s in our own lives. Our entire identity and self-esteem can be twisted up in the dangerous game of trying to be the greatest, whether that means the richest, fastest, strongest, best-looking, most talented, or smartest. And we can be downright mean and nasty to other people who get in the way of our path (or climb) to glory, whether it's at work, in the classroom, at church, or on the field.

Unfortunately, as we find out in today's Gospel lesson, the disciples of Jesus were not immune to the allure of greatness, although for them much more was at stake:

“And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house, [Jesus] asked them, ‘What were you discussing on the way?’ But

they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest” (Mark 9:33-34, ESV).¹

Jesus had just made his second Passion Prediction—a prophecy of his betrayal, death, and resurrection. But they didn’t understand it and didn’t like what they heard, so instead they argued about who was the greatest.

“It’s definitely me,” Peter must have insisted, “because Jesus said that *I’m* the rock on which he will build his Church” (cf. Matt. 16:18).

“But what about us?” asked James and John, the sons of Zebedee. “Peter, weren’t we with you on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured in glory and spoke with Moses and Elijah? We’re part of the inner circle too.”

“He made me Treasurer,” Judas Iscariot chimed in as he flipped a coin and put it in his pocket. “That’s a big responsibility that you don’t just give to anyone” (cf. John 12:6).

“Jesus calls me the Twin,” said Thomas Didymus. “I’m just like him.”

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

“Well, you know,” smiled John ben Zebedee, “*I*m the disciple Jesus *loves*.”

Of course, we don't know exactly what they said as they argued. We can only guess and infer from the tiny glimpses of their personalities in the Gospels. But we know *that* they argued and *what* it was about. Who is the greatest? Who loves Jesus the most? Who is his closest confidant? Who will get to sit at his right hand when he sits on his throne as king (cf. 10:36).

It would be a petty dispute at *any* time. But Jesus had just finished telling them that he was going to be *betrayed*—and die! Mark tells us they argued “on the way” (v. 33), that is, “on the *road*”—the road to Jerusalem and the cross. Didn't they hear Jesus? Or didn't they care? Why were they so concerned with their own supposed greatness that they failed to see what lay ahead on the road for Jesus?

Sadly, the Christian Church is not immune from these arguments about greatness. If you don't believe me, then become a delegate to a District or Synodical Convention, and you will know exactly what I mean. Yet even within the local congregation, there are some people

who seek influential positions, not because they sincerely want to serve others, but because they want to push an agenda or control the outcome of a vote on some issue. They're obsessed with power and enjoy telling other people what to do—people like my 3-year-old daughter Rachel.

On a recent Sunday morning, as I prepared to go to church, Rachel abruptly told me, “Daddy, you can’t go to church.”

“Why can’t I go to church?” I asked.

Rachel said, “Because I said so.”

I laughed and said, “But I have to go to church. I *run* the church. I’m in charge. I’m the boss.”

“No, you’re not,” she said defiantly.

“Then who do *you* think is the boss at church?”

Rachel furrowed her eyebrows and with all seriousness declared, “I am.” So, in case you were ever wondering, my daughter Rachel is the boss of Epiphany. A three-year-old tyrant!

In fact, *Jesus* is the boss of the Church. He’s the only one who died for our salvation. And Jesus knows that debates about the spiritual GOAT are demonic. As James writes in our epistle, such arguments are

“earthly, unspiritual, demonic” (Jas. 3:15). “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice” (v. 16). By way of warning, James quotes from Proverbs 3:34: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (Jas. 4:6).

So Jesus had to set the disciples (and us) straight. He questioned them: “What were you discussing on the way?” (v. 33). Of course, Jesus knew. He is the omniscient (all-knowing), divine Son of God. Even if he weren’t, it wouldn’t be hard to overhear the conversation. You don’t have an argument about who is the greatest in whispers. You shout and yell and laugh at the others to make your point. Jesus knew exactly what they were saying. But he wanted them to *know* that he knew.

But the disciples were too embarrassed to answer Jesus. They knew better. They recognized the wickedness of their selfish ambition.

And then, as if to underscore his point, Jesus went up to a child in the room, hugged him or her, and put them in the middle of the room for all to see (Mark 9:36). (*Aside*: Now that’s what you call a “children’s message”!) “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,

and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me” (Mark 9:37).

You could have heard a pin drop after that. No doubt, the disciples’ shameful silence turned into utter astonishment. Jesus had just made the revolutionary statement that whoever welcomes a child in Jesus’ name actually welcomes Christ himself—and our heavenly Father who sent him.

I know that sometimes people complain about children at our church (yes, even at Epiphany). They grump about babies fussing in church or youngsters being too restless during the sermon. I recently heard from a concerned parent who was receiving the evil eye from other parishioners because of her children’s behavior in church. But that is not how it should be. Children are not only the Church of the future; children are the Church *right now!*

In a later episode, Jesus’ disciples tried to turn away children who came to touch Jesus. But Jesus rebuked his disciples and declared: “Let the little children come; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the

kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Mark 10:14-15). Jesus welcomes little children. And when *we* welcome them, we welcome *him*.

I know a pastor who received many complaints about children in worship. So one day, when a baby started crying in the middle of his sermon, he just stopped speaking. For a few seconds the only sound was that of the baby’s cry. Then my friend cupped his hand to his ear and asked, “Can you hear that?” Of course, they could. “That,” said my friend, “is the sound of a growing church.” Nobody ever again complained to him about kids in church. “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me” (Mark 9:37).

Jesus put forth a child as the paradigm of simple faith and quiet humility for the Church. “If anyone would be first,” Jesus said, “he [or she] must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many” (10:45).

Jesus took it one step further and became *slave* of all. In

Philippians 2 we read:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a [slave], being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he *humbled himself* by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5-8).

Jesus is the eternal Son of God—“God of God, light of light.” He is the ultimate G.O.A.T.—the Greatest of All Time. Yet he humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. He became the *scapegoat*, taking our blame and carrying our shame, so we could be forgiven. He became a slave so that we could be set free. Jesus is the greatest who ever lived—and he gave it all up *for you!*

In this way, we are called to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters in Christ (1 John 3:16). We are called to love and serve our neighbors because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). We are not supposed to “lord it over” each other or get puffed up with pride and importance in the church. We are to become as children, as slaves—as Christ.

In the Church, greatness doesn't matter anymore. Only love matters. Only love remains (1 Cor. 13:13). In the name of Jesus.

Amen.