

Date: September 21

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 25

**SERMON: Great Expectations**

Text(s): Mark 9:30-37; James 3:13-18

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Last week, America and the world lost someone whose name was known, and whose songs were sung even by people who hate Americans. I'm referring, of course, to "The Man in Black," Johnny Cash. You may have read or listened to the instant hagiographies in the popular media. I read the one in *Time* magazine, which summed up their beatification of Cash this way: "Here was a man who had earned his craggy good looks, his Old Testament God voice, his unique hold on the pop-cultural imagination. Here, three generations of music lovers agreed, was a man— in all his imperfections and grandeur." Or as his colleague and protégé Kris Kristofferson put it a bit more colorfully: "He's crossed over all age boundaries, all political boundaries. I like to think of him as Abraham Lincoln with a wild side."

Now even if you're not a fan of country music, and I have to confess that I'm not—maybe living for five years in Kentucky at a time when there was no other kind of music on the radio is partly responsible for my lamentable lack of appreciation for that particular musical genre—there's no disputing Johnny Cash's stature and achievements as an entertainer. In fact, I was struck by the number of times I heard or saw the adjective "great" applied to him. Great artist, great sinner, great Christian, great performer, great symbol, great human being.

That word "great" occupies a huge place in our vocabulary, doesn't it? So huge, in fact, that it has very nearly become one of those words like "nice," that means everything and nothing. It's one of those all-purpose words. We express our appreciation for a good dinner, by saying, "That was great!" to the cook. Our child comes home from school and reports that she got a star on her crayon drawing, and we clap our hands and say, "That's great!" We're making transportation arrangements with a friend to go shopping, and say, "I'll swing by and pick you up around 2:30," and the reply comes back, "Great. See you then."

Tiger Woods and Serena Williams and Michael

Jordan are great athletes. Meryl Streep is a great actress. Bill Gates is a great businessman, and if he keeps up doing what he's begun to do, will one day be known as a great philanthropist.

But regardless of whether it's greatness in the field of athletics, entertainment, science or industry, or in the classroom, all of our definitions of greatness center around the achievements of the individual. It's the person who runs the fastest or scores the most goals or draws the biggest crowds at the box office or discovers a cure for a disease or writes a best-seller or gets high grades, or even, perversely, who kills enough people, upon whom we confer the quality of greatness. If you kill one or even a dozen persons, you're a murderer; if you kill millions in a drive for world domination, you're an historic figure of heroic proportions whose name is remembered and spoken with something approaching awe even centuries later. Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler consistently were proposed as candidates for the title "Man of the Century," not because they were admired, but because they were the architects of so much of the mass killing of that bloodiest of all human centuries. Great good or great evil are equally recognized as great; both are measured by achievement.

What a different concept of greatness we discover in our gospel lesson this morning. Once again, as he so frequently does, Mark offers us a statement of Jesus which is a paradox. I think it was G. K. Chesterton who once said that a paradox was a truth standing on its head. That is certainly an accurate description of this saying of Jesus that we encounter in our lesson today.

The first part of our lesson contains the second of three so-called "passion predictions" that we find in Mark's gospel. He pictures Jesus announcing to his disciples in clear and unambiguous language that he is going to Jerusalem and there he will be rejected, both by the religious and the political authorities, and crucified by the Roman imperial power.

Now, one might expect that with so plain an announcement, made not once but three times, the disciples would be clued-in to what Jesus is all about. But, in Mark's story, that is never the case. He portrays the disciples as a rather dense lot. One of the things that gives me hope in my own journey as a disciple of Jesus, is

Mark's portrayal of the consistent failure of Jesus' first disciples to really grasp what following Jesus was all about. If they could be such blockheads, and still become the foundation of the church, then maybe there's hope for some of the rest of us too.

At any rate, they don't get the point any more clearly after this second announcement of Jesus' passion than they did after the first. Mark says, "*They did not understand him, and they were afraid to ask.*" That's like us too, isn't it? Men have the reputation for being reluctant to stop and ask for directions while driving. It's due to a particular piece of DNA on the male chromosome, I think. We're supposed to be the hunter-gatherers of the tribe, and so we're supposed to have this woodsman's sense of direction about us and not get lost. And when we are lost, we hate to admit it and ask for directions. We're afraid of appearing incompetent. Our partners already know we are incompetent, however, and they only get frustrated by our failure to ask. So Jesus' disciples are just being typical males here. They're afraid to ask for fear of appearing stupid.

Their embarrassment is about to increase, however. When they arrive at home in Capernaum, Jesus asks them what they were discussing "on the way." (There's that "on the way" phrase again that Mark uses so often to mean the path of costly discipleship.) And Mark says that they were silent because while they were "on the way" they had debated among themselves about which one of them was the greatest. Think of it: grown men arguing about which of them is the greatest! How childish! How typical!

Jesus evidently thought so too, because he calls them around him and says, "*Whoever wants to be first among you must be last of all and servant of all.*" Jesus certainly has a fondness for these upside-down, inside-out statements, doesn't he? The one who wants to be first must be last. The greatest of all is the one who is the servant of all.

And then he does the world's first children's sermon. He takes a little child and brings the child among these disciples gathered around him and says something even stranger. "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me,*

*welcomes not only me, but the one who sent me.*"

This statement may not leap out at us as anything particularly surprising or challenging. In our society, children are greatly valued and esteemed. We pass laws to protect children from being exploited as cheap labor, to protect them from abuse by parents or other adults, we buy gadgets to block their access to pornographic internet sites, we spend small fortunes on providing them with education. But in Jesus' day, while children may have been greatly loved by their parents, they were of little or no social value. They were non-persons, in effect. They had no social standing or status. After talking with a former parishioner who was a judge and who spent some years on the bench in domestic court, I'm not so sure the situation has changed as much as we might like to think. In his view, many of the laws on the books tend to classify children as the property of their parents, and accord them few legal rights. To use a current bit of sociological jargon, children were "marginalized." So when Jesus said that whoever welcomed a child was welcoming him, his statement would have had a radical shock value to those who heard it. For it to have the same impact upon us, we might have to think of those who are marginalized in our society and substitute them for the word "child" in that statement. What group or groups of people are excluded from consideration or treated as having no social value?

Would persons suffering from AIDS fit the description? Or perhaps immigrants from another country who have come seeking a better life, only to discover themselves ghetto-ized and sometimes even reviled? Would it be those with serious emotional or mental illnesses? People with Alzheimer's disease? People in prison? And how does our ability to become servants of these people, or to welcome them, relate to the desire for greatness that the disciples have expressed and Jesus' redefinition of that quality?

The problem, you see, both with the disciples' notion of greatness and with our own, I suspect, is that too often, we define greatness only, or at least primarily, in terms of socially-accepted standards of success. We measure greatness by achievement in those areas that our culture deems valuable. We value physical prowess or beauty, or wealth or power or the entrepreneurial spirit, so those who achieve in

those fields, we label great. We reward those we consider great with celebrity or fame, with money or other material things, or by granting them more power. It might even be said to be nature's way of allowing the fittest to survive—we cooperate with the evolutionary process of natural selection. Occasionally we confer greatness on those who exemplify service to others; we beatify the Albert Schweitzers and the Mother Teresas of our world, but I suspect that we do so as a way of keeping their brand of greatness at a safe distance. Most of us, I suspect, would rather be like Bill Gates or Madonna.

Yet, there is something compelling about this topsy-turvy definition of greatness that Jesus invites us to, isn't there? Something that repels us and attracts us at the same time. Something that sounds hard, impossible except to saints like Albert Schweitzer or Mother Teresa, not for ordinary people like us who are just trying to provide for our families and pay our mortgages and make the best out of the hand that life has dealt us. But something also that sounds enormously appealing, tantalizing in its possibilities for giving life a whole new meaning, something that tugs at our hearts. Can ordinary people like us approach to such greatness? Dare we even hope for it?

Nearly thirty years ago, a young Frenchman named Jean Vanier was teaching philosophy at St. Michael's college in Toronto. Vanier was a Christian, and for a long time, he had been searching and questing for a way to become a more faithful disciple of Christ. He came home to France one summer to the village of Trolley-Brueil northeast of Paris, to visit an older priest, Père Thomas Philippe, who had been a spiritual mentor to him since his days as a student at the Catholic Institute in Paris.

During those weeks with Père Thomas, he met two mentally handicapped adult men, Raphael and Philippe, who lived in a large government-operated institution for mentally-handicapped adults. He began to sense God's call to welcome these men into his life, though he had no idea what that meant. At some point during those weeks, he brought them out of the institution to stay with him for a little while in a small house he had rented for himself in the village. But as the days went by, he sensed that something irreversible was happening, that from

that time on, his life would be intimately connected with the lives of these two men, nor could he bring himself to return them to the institution where they had been.

He made no further plans. He was not thinking of any international network of such homes for mentally-handicapped adults. As far as he could discern at that moment, he was being called to live in that little village in that small house over the door of which he hung a wooden sign he had made. It said, "*L'Arche*," "the ark." He devoted himself to making the house fit its name, an ark of safety and shelter for two marginalized men.

Who could have guessed then, certainly not Jean Vanier himself, that 27 years later, there would be branch houses of "*L'Arche*" all over the world—in France, Spain, Italy, Canada, the United States, Mexico, Haiti, the Ivory Coast, India, and many other countries? Its work draws praise from popes and bishops and kings and queens and presidents, and Vanier's books have been a blessing to millions of others who are spiritually hungry and longing for a life that has more than celebrity or material trinkets. But Jean Vanier had no thought of all that might come from his obedience to that inner call to become last of all and a servant of all, to welcome those two marginalized men into his life.

There *is* a way out of the world's madness. There *is* a way out of the strife and hostility and chaos of war and terrorism and competition and corporate greed which grips our world. But in order to find that way out, the world needs to see a model of greatness that arises out of servanthood rather than success-oriented achievement. That's our task as the church of Jesus Christ. That's our calling. We're to be the model of what a community or society looks like when loving service to one another is the essential foundation for human relationships. We're to be the outpost, the embassy of the Kingdom of God.

It will not be easy; allowing our values and loves, our fears and our hatreds to be transformed never is easy. Making room for the stranger, the outcast, the marginalized will often demand more courage or energy than we think we have. Serving the needs of others is costly. Love is always risky. And yet, if we claim to be disciples of Jesus, we are offered no other way to

true greatness. It is only when we aspire to greatness by becoming great servants of others that we become signs of hope to a world in chains, and groaning for freedom.