

Read also Isaiah 57:15-21. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

READ Mark 9:33-37

Greatness is always a temptation. Have you been watching the Olympics? No one trains to lose. Not only does the athlete desire to win, we, too, like for our team to win! Just prior to the disciples' discussion about who was the greatest, Jesus had been telling them he would be killed and that he would rise again. That was a tough sell. They didn't know what to do with that. It distressed them. It's the opposite of greatness. Thus it inspired this debate or argument about who was the greatest.

You wonder what they said. "I healed so and so." "Yeah? Well I cast out that demon." "Oh yeah, well Jesus likes me best. I'm beloved; I'm the greatest!"

Do you ever have a discussion with your friends about who is the greatest? Maybe you argue about your favorite team—Rangers or the Astros? Cowboys, or, as Steve Netniss would say—Saints?

My husband and his friend go to the Rangers games often, both major fans. But his friend is from Houston and loves the Astros, too. So I asked him one day at a Ranger-Astros game—*who ya rooting for?* Rangers, of course, they're the greatest!

It's hard to be humble!

We can argue over who is the greatest because being the greatest is such a temptation.

Satan tempted Jesus with greatness.

1. Be great by using your power—"turn these rocks into bread," Satan tempted.
2. Rule the world and its splendor will be yours—"just worship me and I will give them to you," Satan tempted.
3. Use God's power for your glory—"throw yourself off the temple and God will lift you up," Satan tempted.

Lots of people think this way. Greatness, winning, coming out on the top of the charts is the thing. So why does Jesus teach otherwise? We sang "Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up!" Why is the culture of the church built around humility?

I do not pretend to have the answer to this question. It is not that greatness is so bad or your team isn't supposed to win. Great people have done great things for others. He is not saying greatness is bad. Jesus is defining true greatness. Let's look to the Scriptures for understanding.

Jesus told them:

"If you wish to be first or great or recognized or superlative, in all things be least in rank, or insignificant, or a servant of people out of devotion to God, a deacon (διάκονος)." (v. 35)

He's talking to the church. He took a child and said, "Welcome him. That's how you welcome me."

That was a far cry from what was going on in the synagogue. People wanted to sit in the front row. (They were certainly not Presbyterians! ☺) Leaders wore long robes with fancy tassels, they wore Scriptures in little boxes tied on their foreheads and arms. They liked attention. They were there to impress. They wanted to be first, and known for spiritual achievement.

Well, we are supposed to achieve spiritually aren't we? Shouldn't we read Scripture and sit up front and listen? Yes; but not to earn something; not to be considered special or better than others.

Let's look at Jesus again. Think of Jesus' baptism.

John the Baptist is at the river and Jesus asks John to baptize him. John feels unworthy. But Jesus says, "No, you have been chosen to do this." Surely John remembered the words of Psalm 9, which the choir sang: "God, what is man that you are mindful of him? You have given man a crown of glory and honor."

It was a great honor for John to baptize Jesus.

So when Jesus is baptized, he had not done a thing yet. No miracles. He has not preached one sermon. He didn't have a platform or a following or a website or anything significant. And yet the heavens opened and God's voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, and I am well-pleased with him." (Mt 3:16-17)

God loved Jesus, not because He had done something great, but because Jesus was His. And Jesus was subservient. He got baptized because it was God's plan.

When you get your self-identity and self-worth from being great or having rank and prominence in other people's eyes, you shift from being loved by God to being people pleasers. You change your focus from outwardly toward others, to inwardly on how well you are doing.

That's a trap that will trip you up every time. Jesus operated out of God's love for him and his own love for God, not making a name for himself.

When you operate out of God's love, not by being greater than others, it makes for much less competition and more unity among people.

Isaiah said God was angry with people because they went their own stubborn way. But God realized that if he remained angry, we would all pass away—all the souls he has made. So even though we do not perform up to his standard, he said, *I will heal them anyway! I will lead them. I will comfort those who humble themselves.*

Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up.

Now let's go on. Immediately after Jesus took that child into his lap John changed the subject.

READ Mark 9:38-41:

“Teacher, we saw someone using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he wasn't in our group.” “Don't stop him!” Jesus said. “No one who performs a miracle in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me. Anyone who is not against us is for us. If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded.”

The disciples distinguish between “insiders and outsiders.” But Jesus is broad-minded. Well, actually it was John. John was the one who called himself loved by Jesus. He was in the inner circle. Perhaps it went to his head. He saw someone exorcizing a demon—doing good in Jesus' name.

But that man wasn't part of the “in crowd.” He wasn't a member of the twelve.

It's hard to be humble.

Can you see the difficulty with thinking you are great and striving to be better than others? Can you see the division that such thinking causes? Jesus is broad-minded, focused on opening the arms and embracing those who are not against us, who offer a cup of water. He wants disciples who do not strive to be superior but rather, welcome and serve others.

A Jewish proverb says, “A door that is closed is not easily opened.” That is, when we offend people with an attitude of superiority, it's hard for that door to be opened again later.

When we act in Jesus' name let's humble ourselves because we are God's beloved. Let's include those who are not “one of us” but interested in Jesus.

“He who is not against us is for us,” Jesus says. To be a community in unity, we must proclaim Christ but be open-minded and embrace those who differ from us.

VIDEO <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ie1-vmpamg> (The video is about a high school football team in Olivet, Michigan that, unbeknownst to coaches, set up a play for a disabled boy so he could make a touchdown because being unpopular, the boy would never have a chance to get some glory. The students were profoundly moved by the experience they planned. I hope you get to watch it!)

Saint Augustine says, “Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility.” It's hard to be humble but resting in the love of Jesus will lift you up to sure greatness.

AMEN