

The G.O.A.T.

Luke 9:43-50

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 8, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

⁴³ While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, ⁴⁴ “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” ⁴⁵ But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

⁴⁶ An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, ⁴⁸ and said to them, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.”

⁴⁹ John answered, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.” ⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.” (Luke 9:43-50, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Everybody was amazed by Jesus. That’s how our text begins. How could they not be amazed? He calms the storms, casts out demons, heals the sick, raises the dead, feeds the 5,000. People probably couldn’t get enough of this miracle worker. And imagine how this must have left the disciples feeling. Jesus is a rock star and they are in his inner circle, his best friends. At this point, as his popularity is trending towards its highest point, they must have been quite glad for their association with him. Riding the coattails of a rising star is not a bad place to be.

But Jesus knows something they don’t know. It’s not going to last. And so he warns them, as he had already warned them before. It’s a warning he wants to sink into their ears, “**The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.**” Jesus knew what was coming. Betrayal, denial, desertion, ridicule, and ultimately crucifixion. That’s what was coming. And though they didn’t understand what he was saying at that time, some day they would. And then they could look back and remember his words and be assured that everything took place exactly according to plan.

In their ignorance the most disturbing thing happens next. The disciples have just been told by their master that on their behalf he was going to humble himself to

the point of death, and in response they begin to argue among themselves as to which one of *them* was the greatest. Who knows, maybe Peter, James and John pointed out to the others how Jesus always seemed to pick them for special assignments. Maybe their recent missionary success had led to some boastful chest thumping. We don’t need to know the details to imagine how such an argument could materialize. It happens all the time. And when it does it’s always ugly. Comparison like this, especially among God’s people, is always ugly because it destroys community and diverts praise from its proper focus.

Unfortunately, we live in a world long addicted to comparison. Sports fans of all kinds furiously debate the question of who is the GOAT (i.e. the greatest of all time). Is it Michael or LeBron? Is it Brady or Montana? Is it Ronaldo or Messi? What is it about us that keeps us from simply appreciating the beautiful performances of all these once-in-a-generation athletes without having to decide who is better? Who is better, Mozart or Beethoven, Michelangelo or Rembrandt? What’s the point of such a question? And yet, we can’t help ourselves. We love to compare!

You know, as far as I can tell little children don’t compare themselves to one another. Have you noticed that? By the time they become teenagers, however, every last one of them is doing it constantly. Maybe they learn it from us? Is that your kid playing shortstop or right field? Why can’t you be more like your sister? How did your grade compare to the rest of the class? Do we think they don’t notice that we only post their *accomplishments* on Facebook?

Remember those yearbook polls from school? Most likely to succeed. Best school spirit. Life of the party. My 8th grade year book actually included these categories: Best hair. Best legs. Cutest smile. Most foxy. (This was 1979, so foxy was in.) I thought I had pretty nice legs in 8th grade. I wasn’t even nominated. But can you imagine what we were doing to kids by having them compare one another’s legs!

Just consider for a moment how much of your life you have spent comparing yourself to other people. Your height and weight. Your complexion and color of your skin. The size and shape of various body parts. Your school. Your grades. Your neighborhood. Your parents. Your kids. Your spouse, or lack thereof. Your home. Your car. Your phone. Your friends, even on

Facebook. Your clothes. Your career. Your reputation. Your money. Your age. Your church. Your devotion. Your faith. Your works of service. The list goes on and on.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next person...It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride is gone.” But what if you’re not above the rest? What then? There are only two outcomes that can result from comparing yourself to others, either pride or shame. In other words, there is no good and healthy outcome when you lay some aspect of your life down beside that same aspect in somebody else’s life and ask the question, “Who is better?” And in the end it’s exhausting and depressing. Aren’t you weary of it all? Aren’t you tired of holding up your life next to the lives of others to see who comes out looking better? Can you imagine the freedom you would feel in your life if you never had to compare yourself to anybody else ever again? Can you imagine? To be honest, I can’t even imagine. I wish I could. I’m addicted to it just like you.

And apparently the disciples were just like us. And Jesus knows it. We are told that he was aware of their inner thoughts. He still is, by the way. You realize that, don’t you? I’m reminded of the words of Psalm 139, **“O Lord, you have searched me and known me...you discern my thoughts from far away...and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue you know it completely.”**¹ Was Jesus surprised to discover that his disciples were arguing about who among them was the greatest? No. Is Jesus surprised when he sees us devoting so much energy to comparisons that only lead us to pride or shame? No. And yet these comparisons we make with one another are so foreign to his ways and, therefore, have no place in the kingdom of God. They are so foreign that he can’t just let them be.

So because object lessons help us better learn, Jesus calls a small child to come and stand by his side. It was a place of honor. Maybe you remember another instance when two of Jesus’ disciples lobbied him to have him let them sit at his left and right hand in the coming kingdom of heaven.² To be by the side of Jesus was to be in the most honorable place. So you see, it must have been startling for the disciples to see Jesus welcome a child into that place. Remember, these are the same men who once tried to shoo children away from Jesus.³ Children in those days were considered

unimportant, the bottom of the social ladder. A child might be asked to *perform* an act of hospitality, to wash the feet of a guest for example, but that same child would rarely be the *recipient* of hospitality as this child now was.

So the point of Jesus’ object lesson is crystal clear. *If you want to be a great person than you need to spend your life showing hospitality to the kinds of people nobody else thinks are great people.* It makes me wonder who Jesus would call to his side today if he were making the same point to us. Maybe he’d call a child again, though generally we think more highly of children today. Maybe it would be somebody different for each of us. I mean, who is the last person you would ever think of welcoming into your home? What association might you make with another person that could actually cause others to think less of you? Who is a person whose friendship would be of no worldly benefit to you?

Here’s the question most of us can’t stop asking ourselves: How do I compare? But that’s not the question Jesus wants us to be asking. Instead, he wants us to ask, “Who do I welcome?” So let me ask you to consider this carefully this morning. What sorts of people are the focus of your attention, your time, your love? Who are you drawn to, and what is about them that draws you? Who do you welcome into your home? Who do you gravitate towards at a party, at your lunch break, on the church patio, as your walking downtown? Your answers to these questions will tell you everything you need to know about how great a person you are from the perspective of heaven.

In essence, you see, Jesus is telling us here that if we spend our lives helping, serving and loving people who, in the eyes of the world, do not matter much at all, then we are, in fact, serving Christ and by serving Christ we are, in turn, serving God. If we spend our lives doing the seemingly unimportant things instead of pursuing the things the world says make people great, then we will end up being great in the eyes of God.⁴

But how is this possible? How do we stop asking “How do I compare?” and start asking, “Who do I welcome?” How do we become the kinds of people who are great in God’s eyes?

Well, Jesus ends his object lesson here with a line that, in some form or another, was repeated over and over in his teaching. He declares, **“for the least among all of you is the greatest.”** Now think about that logically for a minute. If the least is the greatest, then it stands

¹ Psalm 139:1-3, NRSV

² See Mark 10:35-45.

³ See Matthew 19:13-15.

⁴ I’m inspired here by William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series: The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1953), 129.

to reason that the greatest of all time is the least of all time. Right? So who is the least of all time? Of all the people who have ever lived, who in the history of this world has descended to the lowest place among us?

Listen to these prophetic verses from Isaiah 53 which describe the coming Messiah, the one who turned out to be Jesus:

**He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.⁵**

Scripture is clear, no human being in the history of this world has ever taken on a lower place than Jesus took – despised, rejected, punished, stricken, afflicted, the sins of all humanity for all time laid upon him. Christ became the least of the least, which means that from the perspective of heaven he became the greatest of the great. Remember Paul’s confession in Philippians 2,

**Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.⁶**

Listen to me. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, made himself the least by associating himself with us, not only by becoming one of us but also by taking upon himself our sin and shame. And in response God, through the resurrection, raised Christ to the highest place imaginable so that – follow me here – *we might also be raised with him!* In Christ and through Christ we have been forgiven and accepted by God as his beloved. God calls us his sons and daughters, shares all that belongs to Christ with us.

This is the Christian Gospel and when believed in faith it sets people free. First it destroys our pride because it

declares that we are so lost, so infected by our inability to live rightly as God intends us to live rightly, that God actually had to come die for us to save us. But then it sets us free. Until you believe the Gospel everything you do in life will in some way be motivated by fear and pride. Comparison and self-promotion will always lurk in the shadows of your heart and mind. But once you place your faith in Christ and receive the free gift of grace he offers, you are immediately set free. Then you find yourself, by grace, in the highest place imaginable.

You are loved and favored by the creator of the universe! So what if the person next to you drives a nicer car, has a thinner body, makes more money, enjoys more popularity, has better behaved children, more connections, nicer legs, whatever. Once you are secure in your status as a beloved son or daughter of God who is highly favored, a status which is given purely by grace, you are now free to give up trying to always promote yourself so you can instead begin to empty yourself and give yourself away. In fact, your association from now on with the lowest of the low in this world will only increase your status from the perspective of the only one whose opinion of these things ultimately matters. Can you imagine the freedom and joy which would result?

Jesus used a child to make his point. Let me use a children’s book to make a similar point. Max Lucado wrote a children’s book some years ago entitled *You Are Special*. I used to read it all the time to my own kids when they were younger because I hoped the message would stick with them as they grew up. I also read it because I needed to message to stick with me as well. I want to read it for you this morning.

The Wemmicks were small wooden people. All of the wooden people were cared by a woodworker named Eli. His workshop sat on a hill overlooking their village. Each Wemmick was different. Some had big noses, others had large eyes. Some were tall and others were short. Some wore hats, others wore coats. But all were made by the same carver and lived in the village.

And all day, every day, the Wemmicks did the same thing. They gave each other stickers. Each Wemmick had a box of golden star stickers and gray dot stickers. Up and down the streets all over the city, people spent their days sticking stars or dots on one another. The pretty ones, those with smooth wood and fine paint, always got stars. But if the wood was rough or the paint chipped, the Wemmicks gave dots.

The talented ones got stars, too. Some could lift big sticks high above their heads or jump over tall boxes. Still others knew big words or could sing pretty songs.

⁵ Isaiah 53:2-4, NIV

⁶ Philippians 2:9-11, NRSV

Everyone gave them stars. Some Wemmicks had stars all over them! Every time they got a star it made them feel so good! It made them want to do something else to get another star. Others, though, could do little. They got dots.

Punchinello was one of these. He tried to jump high like others, but he always fell. And when he fell, the others would gather around and give him dots. Sometimes when he fell, his wood got scratched, so the people would give him more dots. Then when he would try to explain why he fell, he would say something silly, and the Wemmicks would give him more dots. After a while he had so many dots that he didn't want to go outside. He was afraid he would do something dumb such as forget his hat or step in the water, and then people would give him another dot. In fact, he had so many gray dots that some people would come up and give him one for no reason at all.

"He deserves lots of dots," the wooden people would agree with one another. "He's not a good wooden person." After a while Punchinello believed them. "I'm not a good Wemmick," he would say. The few times he did go outside, he hung around other Wemmicks who had lots of dots. He felt better around them.

One day he met a different kind of Wemmick who was unlike any he'd ever met. She had no dots or stars. She was just wooden. Her name was Lucia. It wasn't that people didn't try to give her stickers; it's just that the stickers didn't stick. Some of the Wemmicks admired Lucia for having no dots, so they would run up and give her a star. But it would fall off. Others would look down on her for having no stars, so they would give her a dot. But it wouldn't stay either.

"That's the way I want to be", thought Punchinello. I don't want anyone's marks. So he asked the stickerless Wemmick how she did it.

"It's easy," she replied. "Every day I go visit Eli."

"Eli?"

"Yes, Eli. The woodcarver. I sit in the workshop with him."

"Why?"

"Why don't you find out for yourself? Go up the hill. He's there." And with that the Wemmick who had no stickers turned and skipped away.

"But will he want to see me?" Punchinello cried out. Lucia didn't hear. So Punchinello went home. He sat

near a window and watched the wooden people as they scurried around giving each other stars and dots. "It's not right," he muttered to himself. And he decided to go see Eli.

He walked up the narrow path to the top of the hill and stepped into the big shop. His wooden eyes widened at the size of everything. The stool was as tall as he was. He had to stretch on his tiptoes to see the top of the workbench. A hammer was as long as his arm. Punchinello swallowed hard. "I'm not staying here!" and he turned to leave. Then he heard his name.

"Punchinello?" The voice was deep and strong. Punchinello stopped. "Punchinello! How good to see you. Come and let me have a look at you." Punchinello slowly turned and looked at the large bearded craftsman. "You know my name?"

"Of course. I made you." Eli stooped down and picked him up and set him on the bench. "Hmm," the maker spoke thoughtfully as he looked at the gray dots. "Looks like you've been given some bad marks."

"I didn't mean to, Eli. I tried really hard."

"Oh, you don't have to defend yourself to me, child. I don't care what the other Wemmicks think."

"You don't?"

"No, and you shouldn't either. Who are they to give stars or dots? They're Wemmicks just like you. What they think doesn't matter, Punchinello. All that matters is what I think. And I think you are pretty special."

Punchinello laughed. "Me, special? Why? I can't walk fast. I can't jump. My paint is peeling. Why do I matter to you?"

Eli looked at Punchinello, put his hands on those small wooden shoulders, and spoke very slowly. "Because you're mine. That's why you matter to me." Punchinello had never had anyone look at him like this – much less his maker. He didn't know what to say.

"Every day I've been hoping you'd come," Eli explained.

"I came because I met someone who had no marks," said Punchinello.

"I know. She told me about you."

"Why don't the stickers stay on her?"

The maker spoke softly. "Because she has decided that what I think is more important than what they think. The stickers only stick if you let them."

"What?"

"The stickers only stick if they matter to you. The more you trust my love, the less you care about their stickers."

"I'm not sure I understand."

Eli smiled. "You will, but it will take time. You've got a lot of marks. For now, come to see me every day and let me remind you how much I care."

Eli lifted Punchinello off the bench and set him on the ground. "Remember," Eli said as the Wemmick walked out the door, "you are special because I made you. And I don't make mistakes."

Punchinello didn't stop, but in his heart he thought, "I think he really means it". And when he did, a dot fell to the ground.⁷

Can you imagine the freedom? And Punchinello's story doesn't even capture the full extent of it all, because not only does our carpenter love us as we are, simply because he made us in his image, he loves us to the extent that he has given his life for us so that we could actually become, in him, the people he always intended us to become. He became the least among us so that we could, along with him, be raised to greatness in the eyes of God.

Sadly, however, this is such a hard message for us to embrace in our lives. Even in our text this morning we see just how hard it is for the disciples. Immediately after Jesus teaches them this essential truth, John, perhaps speaking for the rest of the group, demonstrates just how deeply ingrained in us all is this human tendency to look sideways and compare ourselves to others. Some other person isn't casting out demons as well as we cast out demons and, for that reason, don't you think we should tell him to knock it off? It's the same thing all over again. Sadly, even among God's people we are so addicted to comparison and competition.

Maybe that means that the church is the first place we ought to start practicing living into the freedom we have been given. How do I compare to you? Isn't that a question that should be banned from our life together here in the church? Because every last one of us stands

in the very same place before God, loved and forgiven and favored for reasons that have nothing to do with us. There is no room to boast. It's all grace.

Who do I welcome? That's the better question. Who do we welcome? For we have now been set free to welcome anybody, give ourselves away to anybody, rub shoulders with anybody, extend kindness and friendship to anybody, for we have nothing to lose. Through faith and by grace your status before God in Christ is secure for eternity. The more you give away the more you gain. The more you humble yourself the higher God will raise you up. The more you die to yourself the more you will discover how to truly live.

Who is the very last person in this congregation you can imagine associating with as a friend? When you go out onto the church patio this morning after worship is over, who is the person on that patio you are least likely to engage? What kind of people do you hope never join our church? What brand of Christians do you find particularly distasteful? If Jesus came to you today to teach you about true greatness, who would he call to his side, point to, and then look at you and say, "If you welcome this person you welcome me. And if you welcome me you welcome the one who sent me."

There is such good news here. Such good news. The greatest of all time has become the least of all time so that all who place their faith in him might be set free to do the same and, in the end, know true greatness themselves. Set us free, Lord, to follow you in this way.

Amen.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 9:43-50 again and pay attention to what first jumps out to you?
2. An argument arose among the disciples as to which one of them was the greatest? How do you imagine they were measuring 'greatness'? Great at what?
3. With the example of the child, what is Jesus teaching his disciples (then and now) about true greatness? What is it about specifically welcoming such a person that leads to greatness?
4. Jesus says that the least among us is the greatest. What does this mean?

⁷ Max Lucado, *You Are Special* (Crossway Books, 1997). To listen to an exceptional reading of this story, with the illustrations, go to

5. If Jesus wanted to teach you the same lesson today about greatness, who do you imagine he would call to his side as he turned and said to you, "Welcome this person"?
6. Why are we so bent on always comparing ourselves to one another? Where does this come from?
7. Eli says to Punchinello, "The more you trust my love, the less you care about their stickers." Have you experienced this in your life? Do you know God's love to an extent that it has allowed you to worry less and less about what other people think or say about you?
8. Are you great? Is it wrong to want to be great?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Does God love you just the way you are?

Why or why not?