

Truly Great

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 23, 2018
based in Mark 9:33-37, 42*

Greatness. We are dealing this morning with the topic of greatness? Well, let me begin with the best example I know of the kind of greatness I think Jesus is talking about. The initial story I'm using to illustrate it is from 18 years ago. It goes back to the Summer Olympic trials that were held in Colorado Springs in May of 2000. It's the story of two American Taekwondo athletes: Kay Poe and Esther Kim. You may remember them, they were best friends.

Kay Poe, who was ranked No. 1 in the world in her weight class, dislocated her left knee-cap during a match in the semi-finals. She was scheduled to fight Esther Kim to decide who would go to Sydney to compete in the Olympics. Kay Poe had to be carried to the venue to face her friend, Esther.

Give her credit for showing up. But Esther just shook her head when she saw her disabled friend come to the mat. Then she did something amazing. She forfeited the match to Poe, meaning that she herself would stay behind and her friend with the bum knee would qualify.

"We have to fight," the injured Poe said. "I'll do the best I can." She was kind of like the one-legged knight in Monty Python's Holy Grail movie, bleeding and hopping around, saying, "It's just a flesh wound!"

"You can't even stand up," Kim replied. "How are you going to fight me?"

Esther Kim said she made the decision to forfeit without hesitation. "It kind of came up in a heartbeat," she said. "It was an unfair situation to fight your best friend who can't even stand up. I felt it was the only decision to be made."

Interviewed later, Kim said she had no regrets. "There are other ways to be a champion," she said.

Pushed by the interviewer, she insisted that she wasn't grandstanding. No, she had made the only decision she could make. "It wasn't like throwing my dream away," she said. "I'm just passing it over to Kay. The ultimate goal in life is ultimate sacrifice and for the first time in my life I feel like a champion." She said, "When I wake up tomorrow; when I wake up in 10 years, and I think about Sydney, I'm not going to have any regrets and I'm going to know it was the right decision."

In a separate interview, Kay Poe was asked if she herself would have done the same thing had her friend Esther been the one to be injured. Kay Poe was not glib:

"Honestly, I don't know," she said. I think that means, "No, she wouldn't have."

An act of supreme grace, but one that, for Esther Kim, was easy to make because she knew who she was and she knew absolutely what true greatness is and is not. “The ultimate goal in life,” she said, “is ultimate sacrifice.” A soldier would say that, but not most athletes.

Okay, there’s a greatness in that that resonates with the ethics of Jesus – the ethics he taught and the ethics he lived by. But there is more to this morning’s gospel story than that kind of discernment under pressure, so let me go backward some and unpack the whole text as best I can.

You know, there are those sayings of Jesus that are hard to understand. Like when Jesus says, “If your hand offends you, cut it off.” You hear that and you go, “Oh for godsake!”

There are others that are just hard to like, as when he says, “You must hate your parents to be worthy of following me.” But then there are those passages that, on the surface, seem easy, like today’s.

Jesus is on the road with his disciples and the guys are arguing but Jesus waits ‘til they get to their destination to question them about what all the fuss was about.

They are sheepish – silent, because they have been arguing about who is greatest among them. And Jesus says, “If you would be first, you’ve got to be willing to be last. He who would be first of all must be servant of all.” And taking a child in his arms, he says, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.”

Now this saying is so welcome. We like seeing people, like the disciples, get their comeuppance when they are full of themselves, and we like it when Jesus fauns over children. I mean, we all receive children. We’ve even got this huge window behind me with Jesus receiving little ones as the focal point of our worship, and it’s there every Sunday. When he tells us to be receptive to children we’re in; we’re in 100%.

Later, in verse 42 when Jesus says, “Whoever causes one of these little ones to be separated from his parents at the border and put into detention cages like an animal, it would be better for him for a millstone to be tied around his neck and to be cast into the sea.” We hear that and we say, “That’s right,” and “Here, here,” and “Give me the rope and let me be the one to do the honors.” We at Wasatch Presbyterian think we know what is right and what is wrong, and we are fierce defenders of children.

Now, let me acknowledge that there are lots of emotions running high this week regarding the vote to confirm or not confirm our new Supreme Court justice.

I'm not going to go into all that's swirling around that decision, but I want to acknowledge that when it comes to receiving and defending children there are people on both sides of the vote that believe their side is the most just when it comes to receiving children – some are advocating for living children, others for the unborn, and both, of course, are deeply concerned about how the vote in the Senate will come out.

This is the world we live in and we need to be respectful of one another when it comes to matters of conscience no matter where we are coming from.

Now, there is something in this morning's text that doesn't set quite right with me. As a preacher, I have been warned over the years to be careful with this text. It's been much abused by preachers.

We've all heard sermons on the alleged virtues of child-like faith, recommending it as the best model. I may have preached sermons with that message myself, but scholars tell us that if we preach this text as a glorification of children we've gone off the beam, and we are getting it all wrong. That is not Jesus's point.

Why? Well, because in that part of the world in Jesus day children were of little value – they were second class citizens at best. That is how the disciples of Jesus and everyone else understood them.

A child was a burden in a world where only 5% of the population got enough food to thrive. A child was non-productive and therefore dependent. A child was not a full human being until adulthood.

That belief is expressed elsewhere in the Bible: Paul says, "When I was a child I thought and acted as a child, but when I became a man, I gave up childish things." This is not a glorification of children. For those who first heard it, children were of such little consequence as to be incapable of glorification.

No, this morning's text says more about Jesus than about children. "In my kingdom," Jesus is saying, "Even the helpless, valueless, dependent children will be honored – no less than the poor, the outcast, the hungry, the wretched of the earth. Even children."

Here is an illustration of the beating heart of Jesus who serves the lowly, exalts the humble, identifies with the oppressed of all ages and stripes.

The same is said in the last part of Matthew's gospel where Jesus tells the memorable parable of the Last Judgment. On that last day they say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, naked, in prison?" And he said, "When you did it unto the least of these (read: the little ones, the children) you did it unto me." I am the least, the little, the lowly, the child," he said.

So, let's review: Jesus is on his way to his death in today's passage and on the way the disciples are in deep discussion. "What are you talking about?" Jesus asks. They are silent. They are silent because they have been arguing about greatness. "When we get him elected Messiah and his kingdom is come," they have been saying, "which one of us will be appointed Secretary of State?"

And he says, "If anyone would be greatest, he must be least. And he takes a little child in his arms and places it in the middle of them as illustration, as a symbol, as a sacrament of what he is talking about.

It's a nice thought, and one we can be receptive to because even if we have a long way to go in our treatment of the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the homeless who are often unlovely, at least we can take pride that we adults have progressed in our regard for children – okay, at least our own children and grandchildren.

Yes, but what about the children we are **not** acquainted with? What about all the children who aren't "American" (however we define that)? Another story. This one also from the world of boxing. It's a longer story so hang in there with me.

In 1974 Muhammad Ali was scheduled to fight the Heavy-Weight Champion of the World, George Forman, in Kinshasa, Zaire,

Remember that in 1967 Ali had his own title stripped from him because he chose not to serve in the Army during the war in Vietnam, even though he knew, as a champion, he would never be put in harm's way.

For Ali it was a matter of conscience. He was the Colin Kaepernick of his day. Or better, Colin Kaepernick is the Muhammad Ali of today.

We all remember that Ali had more than a swagger about him when he first won the crown. He said, "I am the greatest – the greatest of all time," and few differed with him on that. But by 1974 at age 32, few believed him anymore. George Foreman was a huge bear of a man, and he was seven years younger than Ali.

Now remember, the fight was to be held in Zaire, in Central Africa. At the time most people in the world couldn't pick American President Gerald Ford out of a lineup, but Muhammad Ali? Everyone knew him. His was the most recognizable face in the world.

Then, just five days before the scheduled bout, Foreman received a nasty cut above his eye during a sparring session. Though not permanently debilitating, the wound was severe enough to delay the fight for six weeks; it would not be held until October 30.

Now here's the kicker: President Mobutu, having already invested \$10 million in what would be called "The Rumble In The Jungle," refused to permit the fighters, their entourages, or the various crews to leave the country

Ali screamed about this; what was he supposed to do in Zaire, this 3rd world country, for 6 full weeks?

Well, Mobutu wouldn't budge. So Ali, not one to waste time, started visiting villages, and he found to his surprise, that he loved it. He loved these people. He kept training but he invited the children in those villages to run with him. And an odd thing happened. Ali found a purpose he had never known in boxing before. Here is how he described it later:

"The 'Rumble in the Jungle' was a fight that made the whole country of Zaire more conscious. All the time I was there, I'd travel to the jungles, places where there was no radio or television, and people would come up and touch me, and I could touch them."

Well the more happy and public Ali became, the more sullen and withdrawn became George Foreman. And then came that fateful October day.

The fight began and we saw a different Muhammad Ali in the ring. He was no longer the ultimate aggressor. He bided his time. He did this thing that was eventually deemed the "rope-a-dope."

Ali had been promising for weeks to pull off the greatest miracle since "the resurrection of Christ." What a gross overstatement, but who would say it didn't happen?

Hugh McIlvanney, in his column for *The Observer* of London, expressed most eloquently the stunning turn of events in that Sunday's newspaper, writing, "We should have known that Muhammad Ali would not settle for any ordinary old resurrection. His had to have an additional flourish. So, having rolled away the stone, he hit George Foreman on the head with it."

That night Ali stayed up all night celebrating with the children of Zaire. The children of Zaire.

"Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

What is being the greatest really about?? Well, according to this text, maybe it is about competing to be receptive to children.

In a 1st century context – holding up a child was an enacted parable. It was competing to welcome the lowly; competing to turn the world's standards upside down.

Before the fight Ali called himself a "tool of God," sent to Africa to "free" his people. "I'm gonna fight ... not for me, but to uplift my little brothers who are sleeping on concrete floors today in America . . . black people who have no knowledge of themselves, black people who have no future."

After the fight he realized he wasn't just fighting for America's forgotten children, he was fighting for all the world's children.

We all know that in the ensuing years, Ali was stricken with Parkinson's. And, as with everything else, he rose to it with extraordinary grace.

And think back - wasn't it interesting to watch? I mean, look, George Foreman, for his part, became the most jovial person on the planet. He found his own spirituality in Christianity and it made him pretty darn serene.

He has said he learned so much from fighting Ali. The experience healed him, he said. It turned his life around. It helped him look outside boxing for some purpose he'd never known before.

At the Hollywood debut of the documentary film, "WHEN WE WERE KINGS" about their fight in Zaire, George Foreman hovered over the stricken and silent Ali like a mother -- caring for him; supporting his every step.

Ali basked in the love -- he let Foreman mother him. They had a bond that was forged by an extraordinary experience that had opened up both of their hearts.

Over time they had each become an inspiration to the other, and that inspiration had little to do with the sport of boxing – it was about finding a purpose that was bigger than both of them.

Their greatness was a product of finding a greater greatness outside of them both. That's how true greatness always manifests. It's never in one person alone.

Amen