

The Reverend Kathy Boss  
All Saints' Episcopal Church, Littleton, NH  
Sermon  
September 19, 2021  
Proper 20, Track 2, Year B  
"The Greatest"

[Jeremiah 11:18-20](#)

[Psalms 54](#)

[James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a](#)

[Mark 9:30-37](#)

Many of us, when we are young adults, dream of greatness--of being the best, being famous, being rich. We're quite sure that we can do it better, that we see the right path. Our novel is going to be the most compelling, our company the most profitable and employee friendly, our acting will consistently bring people to their feet, the church we preside over will be overflowing with people, our scientific discoveries will change the world.

You get the picture. It's a natural part of growing up. A part of growing the ego, of differentiating self from others, of seeing possibility.

But as time goes on that urge toward greatness can become distorted. It becomes stuck. Our passion is for the greatness itself, rather than the craft, or the love of others and doing right by the world around us. It takes root in the wisdom of the world rather than the wisdom from above. What drives it there.

Fear, that thing that Jesus so often encourages us to set aside. Fear and insecurity.

Last week we saw Peter's hopes of a great and conquering Messiah dashed, squashed with a brutal, "Get behind me Satan."

Jesus and his followers were an oppressed people. As the theologian, Howard Thurman, puts it "The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed."

But the survival technique was not from the wisdom people knew. It was not about climbing the ladder and displacing those above you--about becoming powerful and great. That still left the ladder in place, still left people on the bottom.

As Jesus tries to get across His new way of thinking about salvation and greatness, a greatness of love and inclusion, of sacrifice and relationship, he avoids crowds speaking deeply to his disciples--to those who will spread the wisdom from above after his death and resurrection.

But what a hard and confusing message to hear! "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." After what had happened with Peter, I can imagine they would be afraid!

You can imagine those young men walking along on the road with Jesus and their companions, totally thrown off, befuddled, unsure, and very insecure about the future--they're great Messiah is going to die. There's no glory, no fanfare, no greatness, no climbing the ladder, only the fulfillment of hard work, and loving sacrifice.

And in that insecurity, they, as do we, assert themselves, vie for a better place in the pecking order. They knew in some part of themselves that this was not right. But it is so gratifying somehow to lean into the ego, to imagine yourself up there on the top looking down. Especially when you have spent most of your life at the bottom of the ladder, and had begun to hope that that was about to change. And yet, they were silent.

Jesus offered his followers a new tool for facing oppression, something far greater than wealth and status. He offered them solidarity, he offered them love, he offered them a life resurrected from pain and death.

I'll say it again, he offered them love, the absolute assurance that they were fundamentally and totally worthy and beloved. That nothing could ever take that away, no matter where they were on the ladder of greatness, which was, after all, a wisdom of below, a construct of the insecure and craving human mind, not of the fullness of God and love.

Christianity has, as Thurman goes on to say, become, "through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression," this "must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus."

All too often Christianity has been used as a tool to assert power. The craving, envy and ambition that James speaks about runs deep in the veins of modern Christianity. Many have even come to believe that our blessings of wealth and status are a result of our favor in God's eyes, rather than the result of years of privilege and power.

We need to set that aside, set aside the childish ego and craving for being seen and acknowledged. What is ours, is not ours, it is God's. It is for sharing, for glorifying, for loving.

There are people out there who have reached greatness as we would define it in the paradigm of wisdom from below, and yet have somehow avoided the pitfalls of ladder climbing, of power over, of greater than...

One such person is Mary Oliver, a woman and a lesbian, white--a person between, a person deeply in love with God and God's creation. Her poetry grew not from ego or craving from her devotion to her craft, her service to

beauty and love, to giving voice to what was already there. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

I'll end today with one of her poems, a beautiful testament to the humble life, to a simplicity and confidence in God's love, that requires us to set aside visions of worldly greatness, and perfection, and embrace a life of love and service.

Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but  
still nothing is as shining as it should be  
for you. Under the sink, for example, is an  
uproar of mice — it is the season of their  
many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves  
and through the walls the squirrels  
have gnawed their ragged entrances — but it is the season  
when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And  
the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard  
while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;  
what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling  
in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly  
up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will  
come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,  
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know  
that really I am speaking to you whenever I say,  
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.  
+ Mary Oliver