

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 22, 2024

“What does being the greatest mean?”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost. As we head into election time, I find it interesting that we come to scripture that makes us look at what is really important. Important, not to the world, but to God. We are called today to take stock of ourselves and our ways of being and become our better selves.

We begin today's Gospel with the disciples arguing about which of them is the greatest. This argument probably happened more than once, behind and in front of Jesus as we hear this type of behavior in multiple Gospels. And why wouldn't the disciples want to be ranked as the greatest, or at least better than some of the others? And let's understand that for these followers of Jesus, they were making strides at something they sought after - but didn't understand. Let's look at what may have been included in that conversation.

Maybe Simon or Andrew started claiming that one of them was the greatest because they were the first disciples called and seniority matters. Let's face it, we have all argued that at some point in our lives.

It is possible Peter argued that it should be him because he was the only one who correctly answered Jesus, “You are the Messiah”. Being correct and having the answers should count for something, right? And maybe the others responded with rejection stating, “No way, Peter. Jesus rebuked you and called you 'Satan'. That's not so great.”

Then there was the little group of Peter, John, and James who thought it was one of them because they got to go up the Mount of Transfiguration and the others didn't.

Besides that, those left behind couldn't even cast out a demon from a young boy. Shouldn't the greatest be the most successful?

Then maybe Peter touted himself above the others because he had walked on water. As the other disciples they rolled their eyes and said, "Yeah, and you sunk like the rock that you are." After all, the greatest is often only as good as their last accomplishment.

What about Judas? So you think it was an eleven to one vote against Judas. They all knew he was a thief. Morals are important to greatness. It's lucky for Peter and Judas that when this argument took place they had not yet betrayed or denied Jesus because that's not what the greatest disciple would do. Maybe John argued that he was the greatest because he was the beloved disciple who laid his head on Jesus' chest. As the greatest are always well-placed and connected in high places.

And lastly what about those other disciples who are not quoted in the gospels and have no gospel named after them? It couldn't be them. Surely, the greatest disciple would at least be published. Oh, what discussion must have taken place; all with Jesus just shaking his head.

I can easily imagine each disciple making a case for their own greatness and a case against the others. Do you know why that's so easy for me to imagine? Because it's often the conversation I have in my head with myself. Maybe you do too. It seems we are always establishing pecking orders of greatness. Look at the pecking orders in our world and country today. They are all around us. We live with and participate in them even if we did not create them.

Citizens are greater than immigrants. The educated are greater than the uneducated. The rich are greater than the poor. The employed are greater than the unemployed. Men are greater than women and straight people are greater than gay or lesbian people. White or light skinned people are greater than dark skinned people. The gifted

and talented student is greater than the student in shop class. Christians are greater than Jews who are greater than Muslims. And the list could go on and on.

I wonder what pecking orders govern our lives today? Who are the winners and losers? In what ways are you and I striving for greatness? What arguments or conversations about who is greatest are we having with ourselves or others?

But what if we have completely misunderstood what greatness is really about? What if Jesus is reversing everything we thought we knew or had been told about greatness? What if greatness in Jesus' mind is not about how much we have or what we have accomplished, but about what we've offered and done for others? What if greatness is not about the position or place we occupy, but about the space and place we offer others?

What if everyone took a moment and stopped arguing about and striving to be the greatest, and sought to discover or recover and bring out the best in ourselves and each other? What would that look like in your life today?

How would you feel if you looked in the mirror and instead of comparing yourself to a younger version, or a media person, you simply were grateful for you. What if the critic in your head just simply said, 'good for you'. Jesus is not asking us to be the reluctant servant here; he is calling us to be the joyful helper.

And to take this one step further, what if we didn't judge those around us? We will never know what anyone else is truly dealing with in their own lives. Jesus is calling us to live lives with authenticity, honesty, and integrity. Being someone that can be counted on. To have each other's back and be there when you're needed. Others then can see, respect, and listen to you serving and living in joy. This is living the Gospel, and it takes courage.

Jesus is always naming and calling forth the best in us. For God's sake, for the sake of the world, for the sake of ourselves and one another, let's stop arguing about who is the greatest, whether that is in your outside world or inner thoughts. If you were to be the best version of yourself that someone has ever met, what would you want that to look like? What qualities or characteristics would you want to put forth? What do you need forgiveness for or encouragement in to not worry about where you are in the pecking order? What parts of your life need strengthening in order to experience fully that you are a child of God and that is enough?

Let us welcome each of us to see the light of Christ in each other as we remember we are all children of God. Amen