

Story and Meditation: Greatness

September 19, 2021

Psalm 54

Mark 9:30-37

by Eric Anderson

‘Elepaio are among the most curious of creatures. It serves them well when seeking food, because the insects they feed on hide in a lot of different places. Beyond that, however, they look at things, and listen to things, and think about things that other birds in the forest may ignore.

One ‘elepaio on a sunny morning perched on the thin branches of a young koa tree, gazing up at a magnificent mature koa whose massive trunk supported branch after branch stretching toward the sky. “What, I wonder,” murmured the ‘elepaio, “makes something great?”

“You ask what makes greatness?” sighed the koa, its words shaped by the leaves in the breeze. “You ask what is great?”

The ‘elepaio is a small bird, not given to bragging or arrogance. It lives with great caution lest an ‘io or a pueo discover it. The ‘elepaio had no ambition for “greatness,” but it believed it could recognize something great when it saw it. The massive trunk and the soaring branches and the towering crown of the koa tree, he was sure, made it great.

The tall koa shook its leafy head. “I am not so great,” it said softly. “Look deeper.”

The ‘elepaio looked, and saw the sun beaming down from overhead, glistening on the compound leaves of the young koa in which he perched. For a moment he could feel that sunlight, its power cast over such long distances filtering gently down, feeding the young koa, giving it strength to raise its branches and to dig in its roots.

“Listen deeper,” said the tall koa, and the ‘elepaio listened and could almost hear those roots down below as they sought for tiny bits of minerals that helped the growing tree build itself.

“Feel deeper,” said the tall koa, and the ‘elepaio felt the raindrops falling, felt the raindrops on his own feathers but also the moisture that satisfied the little koa’s thirst, swelling those leaves, broadening them to drink in more sunlight when the clouds parted.

“It is the tiny things,” said the tall koa, “the sunlight, the soil, and the sweet rain that feed the young trees. I am the result of their care over years and years; my height has nothing to do with me.

“So who is great?” asked the ‘elepaio, though he knew the answer.

“Greatness feeds leaf and root. Greatness swells branch and trunk. Greatness is what feeds the tree so that it can grow.

“Greatness,” said the tall koa, “is the small things that give us life.”

I don’t like to admit it, but there is a part of me that wants to be great.

I don’t like to admit it because that desire has less to do with commitment or determination, and more to do with arrogance and entitlement. I was a pretty diligent and successful student, and part of me believed I should be valedictorian. I wasn’t. From time to time I’ve been recognized for things I’ve done or invited to take leadership in certain ways. What I rarely admit is that when others are being honored part of me wonders why it wasn’t me. Most of the time that’s a ridiculous question – I’m not even close to being eligible for a Nobel Prize in Chemistry – and I rather wish that interior arrogance would hush.

Still, it does mean that when the disciples argued about who was greatest, I understand. I, myself, would probably have stayed silent during the argument, but I would have been convinced it was me.

Like Jesus’ friends, I would have been incorrect.

Jesus, speaking to them in those moments, and Mark, telling the stories of these moments, both sought to tell us something about the nature of greatness, something that Christians have known and held and valued in the centuries since but, truthfully, find it very difficult to live out. There’s another definition of greatness out there, and it’s the one that gets the most attention. Greatness is big. Greatness is showy. Greatness is... well, the strange part is, it’s not necessarily good for anybody except a few. Strange, that.

The Great Wall of China is long and high. The Great Barrier Reef is long and rises close to the ocean’s surface from the floor below. The Great White Shark is big and hungry.

Alexander the Great led conquering armies. Frederick the Great led conquering armies. Catherine the Great ordered others to lead conquering armies.

The Great Plague – there’s a few that go by that name – killed lots of people. The Great Depression impoverished – and killed – lots of people. The Great War killed an estimated 21 million people, military and civilian combined.

Jesus would hear these things described as great and hang his head in despair. “No,” he would whisper with the tree. “Greatness is the small things that give us life.”

D. Mark Davis, on his blog [LeftBehindAndLovingIt](#), offers the daring suggestion that perhaps the disciples weren't arguing about their own greatness, but actually arguing about whether greatness consisted of success and conquest or in suffering and sacrifice. He writes, "Since the disciples are scared to disclose their conversation to Jesus, maybe they were taking issue with his insistence that the Son of Man must suffer, calling it nonsense or even preferring the biblical image of the Son of Man coming in the clouds from Daniel to the Suffering Servant from Isaiah. My current thinking is that, just because they do not want to respond to his question does not mean they were simply engaged in a petty conversation. They may have been asking the right questions, raising the right objections, but leaning away from Jesus' own paradoxical understanding of greatness. Certainly most of the world feels that way."

Whether the disciples were asking the right question or not, I think it is the right question. Can we accept a notion that greatness consists of service? Can we adopt it? Can we live by it? We have the example of Jesus that it can be done. We have the later examples of followers of Jesus, many of them across the centuries, that also demonstrate that it can be done. We also see in all too many of those examples what the cost of discipleship, a discipleship of service, can be. Title, honors, wealth, comfort, even life itself: Jesus and Jesus' followers have given these up time and time again.

The key is the child.

We know how this works, or how it works best. We give things to children so that they will live and thrive. For quite a long time, we expect very little in return. Even when we start expecting children to contribute to the welfare of the household, that expectation has a lot less to do with the welfare of the household and much more to do with the education of the child. Even that is in the way of a gift.

At one and the same time, children are highly valued – look at what we give them – and widely disregarded. We don't ask for their opinions about great matters. We don't let them vote. We don't invite them to determine family plans even as we make our plans around their needs.

As Karoline Lewis writes at [Working Preacher](#): "Mark is pointing to something important, something essential, about believing in Jesus. Because God becoming human, the incarnation, upended every assumption of greatness that the world deemed as definitive. Because God becoming human decided that greatness is not about separation but solidarity, not about better than but relationship. Not about self-adulation but empowerment and encouragement of the other.

"Greatness is determined by weakness and vulnerability. By service and sacrifice. By humility and honor. By truthfulness and faithfulness. We are called to preach this kind of greatness, we are called to embody this kind of greatness, so that the world can witness the true meaning of greatness born out of love."

From Maren Tirabassi at GiftsInOpenHands, this poem that shows us the true breadth of this love:

As Mark tells it,
Jesus put a child in the midst of them,
but Mark forgot to mention the kid
was a little pudgy, some early acne,
playing a hand-held video game.
Not a superpower kid.
Not even an adorable and hungry child
that makes you want to donate money
or go on a mission trip.
Not your kid,
or the one you would like
to remember right now.
Just a kid who breaks something
she shouldn't touch,
who tries his parents' wine
and fills it back with water.
OK – by now,
it's pretty much all water.

When Jesus touches
the stereotype of greatest,
all our stereotypes are broken.

I would still like to be great. That little voice still whispers, "You're a great preacher, a great writer, a great singer, a great dancer" – actually, it doesn't say dancer. But it's whispering, whispering, whispering, and it's hard to ignore.

My choice, as much as I can, is to live toward the greatness that Jesus summoned me to: embrace my weaknesses as warmly as I do my strengths, to take up the burden of humility rather than seek for honors, to speak the truth I think I understand as well as I can, and acknowledge my errors as soon as I can.

I aspire toward greatness, one that I fully expect will pass unrecognized by the world because it cannot be big or flashy or showy. It will not stretch across the hills and plains of Asia, nor will it consume millions of lives. My hope and prayer and labor is that this greatness will embrace those who need the most, will feed those who are the most hungry, will reassure those who are most afraid.

Amen.