

Opinion Polls
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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Psalm 1
Mark 9:30-37

I'm going to give you a quote and you tell me who said it...

"I am the greatest!"

Yes... it is Muhammed Ali.

What defines Muhammed Ali as the greatest? What was it in his life?

- Was it when he was boxing? All those titles, those spectacular fights?
- Was it when he refused to serve in Vietnam due to his principles as a conscientious objector and was stripped of his boxing titles and barred from competing in the sport?
- Was it when he stood up to racism in the community through working in the Civil Rights Movement?
- Was it when he spoke out against Islamophobia after 9/11 and worked to educate people that Islam was a religion of peace?
- Or that through his charitable work he fed an estimated 22 million starving people?
- Or that he talked a suicidal man out of jumping off a building in downtown Los Angeles in 1981?
- Or was it when he showed the world through his presence what it was like to live with Parkinson's and continue to fight for another day, testifying to congress for another round of funding, acceptance of one living with this difficult condition in the mainstream, not to be shunted away?

"I am the greatest," said Ali. Which of these showed true greatness?

Jesus tells us today, that unless you become like a child you cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Now we think, "aw, how sweet." Jesus with a child on his lap. What a photo op!!
But that was not what the disciples were thinking. Or anyone else standing around either.

Children in Jesus day were property. They had no status. They were less than slaves. They had no voice. They were bought and sold. Less than half ever achieved adult age due to child mortality.

But until they did, they were non-entities, nobodies, nothing. Not the way we see children today as the future, as ones to be treasured and protected. So in other words, Jesus said that God's kingdom belongs to those to whom the world said nothing belonged. The nobodies.

"You welcome the nobodies, you welcome me. You care for the nobodies, that is what the kingdom of God is about."

This is not what the disciples had been thinking about. When asked what they were talking about on the road, none of them would answer Jesus. But he knew. They were fighting. Who was the greatest, who did Jesus like best, who was going to get the big titles once Jesus was in power?

They are fighting about status. About titles. About power and privilege.

We spend so much time on this. The next promotion, the achievement of more advanced degrees, the larger bank account or house in the right neighborhood, the paper in the right journal. We want to be seen well in the opinion polls of our peers, the opinion polls of the world around us.

But Jesus isn't.

He asks, "what about the nobodies?" What are you doing for them? How is what you are doing serving the least, the lost, the discarded?

Nobodies.

In Jesus's day, that was children.

In Ali's day that was the starving people in Africa, the suicidal, Muslims after 9-11, those living with debilitating illness.

Who is it in our day?

I included the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon on the front of the bulletin because it makes me laugh. I laughed before I had kids and I really laugh now as a parent. Calvin, the six year old, is telling his dad that his opinion polls are going down.

In another similar cartoon Calvin says.

"Bad news Dad. Your polls are way down."

"My polls?"

"Your rate is especially low among tigers and six year old white males."

Especially low among tigers and six year old white males...Calvin's dad just rolls his eyes and goes back to the paper.

Calvin is assuming that his dad will be bothered, hurt, upset, angry by his low poll scores. And, of course, then let Calvin stay up later or have more dessert or skip homework. Calvin is counting on the poll to change his dad's mind. That the opinions of tigers and six year old white males matters deeply to dad.

Let me ask you, those who have kids and those who work with kids: how successful is a mother if she is concerned with the opinion polls of her children? How successful is a dad if he is currying favor with a mischievous 6 year old?

Not very. Because parenting isn't about winning the opinion polls of our kids. It is about doing what is right, what is best, and making hard decisions. Don't I wish I was my kid's favorite parent all the time. But I am often instead the "meanest Mom in the world." Sigh.

Life in the church is not about rising in the opinion polls either.

It used to be. Seriously. In the 1950's and 60's people flocked to churches, Protestant churches in particular, because it was a place to be seen. Leadership in the church could provide an opening to leadership in the community. Attending church was a place to make connections. A place to gain favor. I mean our history as Congregationalists is that unless you were a member of the church back in the 1700 and 1800s, you couldn't vote in town elections.

Now, that's not all that was going on in churches, but that was a piece of what was going on under the surface.

Do people come to church to gain status these days? No, they don't. Church is not central, it is a sideline. We don't gain in the opinion polls if we go to church. More likely is that folks will wonder what it means. You go to church, are you weird in some way?

And yet here we are. Very much not unbalanced, but wondering sometimes what it means to be church in this day in age. We can be worried as we think about the future.

- Worried about membership
- Worried about status of churches in this country
- Worried about how to pay the bills--the heat, the lights, the staff

As we think about calling a new pastor here we can look back and want to "Make churches great again."

But I can tell you, that is not going to happen. Not in the ways of the 50s and 60s.

We can look back specifically to this church's history and think "Make Pilgrim great again."

That is not going to happen either. What I mean by that is that Pilgrim is not going to return to what it was in the 80's and 90s. That is past and we are not able to move forward to greatness if we think about it in terms of past.

Instead, what greatness lies ahead?

Jesus says to enter the kingdom of God, to be great, is to welcome least of these. Welcome the nobodies.

What could that mean for Pilgrim?

Next Saturday is the WISE conference in nearby Andover. This conference educates congregations on how to be welcoming to those struggling with mental illness or those with family members struggling. It offers ways for churches to start mental health ministries.

What would it mean to be church that truly welcomes, understands, ministers to individuals and families struggling with mental health challenges? Those who are stigmatized due to their illness?

What service would that be to Lexington, to the communities around Lexington, to know that here at Pilgrim, nobodies are welcome.

What would it mean to be church welcomes, heals, holds those struggling with opioid addiction, their friends and families? Addicts are definitely counted among the least of these. And often their family members are blamed and shamed as well. What would it mean for communities in this area to know that those addicted are welcome here? Not just to use our basement for meetings, but welcome to be in worship and service with us.

There are many nobodies to choose from. In some ways we are no further along that in Jesus' day.

- Refugees
- Political asylum seekers
- Homeless or nearly homeless
- Transgender folks at risk from this year's ballot measure in MA

Welcoming these folks will not make Pilgrim rise in the opinion polls around town.

But it will open the gates to the kingdom of God in this place, here and now.

The greatest...in the eyes of God.

Amen.