

THE G.O.A.T.

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It was the bottom of the fourth inning of the home opener for the Atlanta Braves — April 8, 1974. The LA Dodgers were leading 3-1. Darrell Evans had reached first on an error. Al Downing was on the mound and behind in the count 1-0. The batter hit the next pitch over the left-centerfield wall for a two-run homer. Henry “The Hammer” Aaron had broken Babe Ruth’s thirty-nine year major league record. Interestingly, Babe Ruth hit #712, 713, and 714 in his final game for the Boston Braves. He retired eight days later in 1935.

53,775 fans were on their feet, screaming and clapping and celebrating as Hank Aaron made his way around the bases and I was one of them. My high school buddies and I planned ahead and bought tickets for the opener. We hoped he would break the record that night. We sat in the upper deck behind home plate. My ticket cost \$3! We went back on Thursday night, April 11 and The Hammer hit #716. It was always exciting to see him hit a home run. But there were only about 1,000 fans in the stands that night — the Braves weren’t playing very good ball! In my book, Hank Aaron is and will probably always be the Major League Baseball Homerun G.O.A.T. — Greatest of All Time. I know, I know, Barry Bonds is listed as #1 with 762 home runs (seven more than Aaron), but I don’t think The Hammer ever did any doping. . .

The sports world is full of G.O.A.T.’s. Simone Biles is considered the G.O.A.T. in women’s gymnastics. Mia Hamm is named the G.O.A.T. in women’s soccer. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is the G.O.A.T. in men’s college basketball. Although he is no longer home run king, Babe Ruth is ranked as the Major League Baseball G.O.A.T. In the PGA, is Jack Nicklaus or Tiger Woods the G.O.A.T.? How about the NFL — is Tom Brady the G.O.A.T.? And, of course, there is the NBA — who gets your vote as the G.O.A.T.? Michael Jordan or LeBron James? With twenty major titles each, the jury is out on who is the G.O.A.T. in men’s tennis — Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, or Novak Djokovic.

And who can ever forget Muhammed Ali? When he went by Cassius Clay, he won the boxing gold medal in the 1960 Rome Olympics. Three years later, he was scheduled to fight Sonny Liston for the World Heavyweight Title. Liston was heavily favored, but Clay wasn’t worried. He wrote a poem for the occasion, the last stanza of which said, “The fistic world was dull and weary, But with a champ like Liston, things had to be dreary. Then someone with color and someone with dash, Brought fight fans a-runnin’ with plenty of cash. For I am the man this poem is about, the next champ of the world, there isn’t a doubt. I am the greatest!” Liston gave up at the beginning of the seventh round and, despite being a 7-1 underdog, Cassius Clay was The Greatest (but he already knew that). At the end of his career, few boxing fans dispute that title.

I reckon, with a few outstanding exceptions, there will always be arguments about “Who is the greatest?” Obviously, it’s not a modern day phenomenon. As Mark tells us in today’s story, when Jesus and his disciples got to the house in Capernaum, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” Imagine the disciples’ body language! Scuffing feet, diverted eyes, clearing of throats, furtive glances at each other — but nobody said anything. Why? “for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.” (Mark 9:34)

What do you suppose they were saying to each other? Peter: “Well, I was the first disciple Jesus called. He obviously looks to me as the leader. I was up on the mountain when he was transfigured. Surely I’m the G.O.A.T.” But James and John would interrupt him, “Well, he called us right after he called you . . . just because your boat was a little further up the beach than ours doesn’t automatically make you the G.O.A.T.!” Maybe Judas cleared his throat and said, “Yeah, well, I’m the one who controls the purse strings, so obviously I should be considered seriously as the G.O.A.T.”

2,000 years later we are embarrassed for the disciples! In the presence of Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem, they’re arguing about who is the greatest? Really? But before we judge them too harshly, we ought to recognize ourselves in their behavior. After all, that’s the way of the world. Somebody’s got to be #1. Somebody’s got to be the G.O.A.T. It might as well be me, huh?

But what makes the disciples’ argument about greatness even more inappropriate is that they seek to build themselves up according to the world’s standards of greatness immediately after Jesus has taught them how he is going to lower himself in humility, even to the point of death on a cross. And this isn’t the first time, nor is it the last, that the disciples embarrass themselves. After each of the three times Jesus teaches them about his suffering and dying, the disciples show they just don’t get it. Peter rebukes Jesus. The twelve argue about who is the greatest. And, finally, James and John ask Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” (Mark 10:37)

But Jesus confounds his disciples and us with his teaching: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:35) Jesus doesn’t lay out a plan for success. He isn’t giving pointers about how to adopt some kind of false humility in order to jump the line and make it to #1. Instead, Jesus redefines what it means to be great in his service and in the kingdom of God, just as he redefines what it means for him to be Messiah.

“But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” (Mark 9:32) In his comments on the disciples’ misunderstanding, David Ewart imagines their response. This sounds like it might be Peter talking: “I don’t understand. Didn’t I just proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior — Messiah? Doesn’t ‘Lord’ and ‘Savior’ mean ‘Boss’ and ‘Hero?’ I thought we were headed for glory. For good times. For winning. Doesn’t Jesus being in charge and our hero mean we get to AVOID pain, humiliation and death? Whoever heard of the guy in charge of it all voluntarily accepting getting killed? I don’t get this part. and I am afraid to ask because if I ask, and if he tells

me, and if I do get it, then maybe I'll have to give up my dreams of glory, of good times, and winning. Avoidance and denial are definitely the preferred plan of action here."¹

A month from now, we will hear the story about James and John requesting seats of honor and power and glory in Jesus' kingdom. The other ten disciples were angry when they heard about the brothers' request. Maybe each of them thought they deserved that honor instead of James and John. Anyway, in the face of their anger at two of their own, Jesus said, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45).

Did you know that our *Book of Order* cites those very words of Jesus in the definition of Ruling Elder? "Congregations should elect persons of wisdom and maturity of faith, having demonstrated skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit. Ruling elders are so named not because they 'lord it over' the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life." It's what we call "servant leadership," a term coined by Robert Greenleaf in a 1970 essay "The Servant as Leader." "Servant leader" can be applied to both individuals and to organizations, such as congregations. According to the Center for Servant Leadership, "A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the 'top of the pyramid,' servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible."²

Certainly, Jesus was a servant-leader. He came to serve and not to be served. He also shared his power with the disciples when he sent them out in his name. He always put the needs of others first. He helped people find abundant life. He modeled for his disciples the kind of life expected of his followers. But he also used a stunning visual aid in that house in Capernaum when he placed a little child in their midst, hugged the child, and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37)

Jesus wasn't commending the child's sweetness or innocence or childlike faith. Rather, Jesus turned the social hierarchy on its head! Little children, in Jesus' time, even though considered blessings from God, were among the most vulnerable, the most powerless, the most marginalized, the least greatest in the community. And little children in the Roman culture had an even harder life. "So you want to be the G.O.A.T.?" Jesus asked. "That means putting yourself last so others can get ahead. That means stooping down and washing someone else's feet. That means thinking of yourself and your own ambitions less and thinking of God and God's ways even more. That means paying attention to and serving the least of these, like this little child here in our midst."

We celebrate the amazing, lifetime achievements of athletes. As long as we keep score and track stats, someone is going to be the G.O.A.T. (at least, until someone else comes along). But Jesus teaches us a different way to be the G.O.A.T. in God's kingdom — "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." That teaching is just as shocking and counter-cultural in the 21st century as it was when Jesus spoke it in that house in Capernaum in the 1st century. And yet, that's the kind of life Jesus calls us to if we want to follow him — in our individual Christian lives and in our life and ministry as a congregation.

Always remember, we are never alone in our journey along the way. As I close this morning, let me share some thoughts from David Lose's blog, "A Different Kind of Greatness." In these words we can find hope and encouragement: "I think there are three short prayers that pretty much sum up the Christian life, and they came to mind as incredibly helpful when we consider Jesus' teaching. The first is in response to his counter-cultural command that the first must be last and that true greatness lies in service. It is as short as it is simple: 'Lord, help us.' The second comes when we fall short of our ideals, giving in to insecurity and fear and looking out for ourselves first: 'Lord, have mercy.' And the third is when we realize that even as we fall short, yet Jesus still died for us, still lives for us, still loves us more than anything: 'Thanks be to God.' For Jesus does not give up on his disciples — not then and not now — and still offers us a different vision of greatness that can lead us to imagine and work toward a whole different world."³

Brothers and sisters, may each and every one of us live and work toward being the G.O.A.T. as Jesus' disciple. For it is true, in God's kingdom and in Jesus' service, there is always room for more than one G.O.A.T.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, your weakness is greater than our strength and your gentleness confounds the power we would claim. You call the first to be last and the last to be first, the servant to be leader and the ruler to be the servant of all. Pour into our hearts the wisdom of your Word and Spirit, that we may receive you and humbly serve all people in your name. Amen.

NOTES

¹David Ewart, "Holy Textures: Mark 9:30-37, September 19, 2021," at www.holytextures.com.

²"What is Servant Leadership?" at www.greenleaf.org.

³David Lose, "Pentecost 18B: A Different Kind of Greatness," September 17, 2018 at www.david.lose.net.