

- I. In February 1964 after defeating Sonny Liston to become the World Boxing Heavyweight Champion for the first time Muhammad Ali professed, "I am the greatest. The greatest thing that ever lived. I don't have a mark on my face, and I upset Sonny Liston, and I just turned twenty-two years old. I must be the greatest." Ali wasn't the first, nor the last, to profess such greatness. It is a war that has been raging for an eternity between groups of people, and also individually. Who is the greatest general or leader? Who has the greatest clan, nation, or god? The Olympics were built on the principle of countries coming together and competing in non-violent ways to determine which country has the best athletes collectively, and which athlete is the best of the best.
- II. This debate has spawned the term G.O.A.T, an acronym for greatest of all time, where you compare not only those who are competing today, but everyone that has gone before them. It's a debate that has gone on between supporters of athletes of all sports, and has spilled into discussions of which president, author, or actor is the G.O.A.T? Or what movie is the G.O.A.T? Whatever can be categorized, a debate has ensued about who or what is the greatest. When people can't pick just one they say they have a Mount Rushmore, and list off a top four. Who is on your Mount Rushmore of disciples, books of the Bible, preachers, or theologians? It's a fun discussion to have between friends or co-workers at the water cooler, maybe those last few categories are reserved for a select few.
- III. What I find ironic is that the term Goat used to refer to scapegoat, and this has changed in my lifetime. The term 'scapegoat' dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when William Tyndall coined the term in his Bible from 1530 to describe a ritual from the Jewish Day of Atonement, which was celebrated this past Wednesday. The ritual was that two goats were sacrificed, one to YHWH so that he would pardon the people for the sins they committed, and the other was sent out into the wilderness with red tassels around its horns, bearing the sins of the people. Once the tassels were bleached white the goat could be welcomed back into the community, of course the goat was dead long before then. If you were the goat you weren't the greatest, you were the one who took the blame for your family, community, or team's failings even though it wasn't all your fault. Probably the greatest scapegoat in sports history is possibly Bill Buckner for the Boston Red Sox in the 1986 World Series. Maybe for you FSU fans its Gerry Thomas who is responsible for Wide Right I in 1991. For every lost game and election, in every family, church or community failing there is scapegoat. But since about the year 2000 or so the term took on its current connotation as an acronym for the Greatest of All Time.
- IV. Humans are one of the few animals that are self-aware and self-conscious, and the only ones who are aware that one day we will die. We know that our days are fleeting, that we had a starting point, and will have an ending point. And because we know at some point we will cease to exist we want to be remembered. We want to do something with our lives that will outlast our brief stint on this planet, whether it is through our job,

raising a family, or spending our free time in meaningful ways. We hope that we will be remembered and leave a legacy, and in order to do this it often means we must push ourselves to be the greatest.

- V. This idea of striving for greatness is implanted within us at an early age in school. It seemed like every year there were activities our teachers would have us do to encourage us to consider what we want to be when we grow up. At seven and eight they wanted us to consider how we were going to be great in our forties and fifties. Now, I ate this up. I have always been a goal setter, and I loved this type of thinking. For Presidents' Day in second grade, I think, we wrote out what we would do if, or when, we were elected President. In fourth grade for career day, we had someone come in who told us that in his opinion the three most important occupations were those who care for others, particularly, doctors and nurses, teachers, and preachers. He offered us a different sort of idea of what having a great job meant. But for the most part in elementary and middle school, I wanted to be a great football player or coach, and if I couldn't do that I wanted to be Jerry Maguire and be a sports agent. It is the mindset of striving towards greatness and living out our dreams that drives humankind to do great and wondrous things, to achieve goals that were previously unattainable or unthinkable.
- VI. But while this mindset is a great driver, and it certainly has been for me, it also has the capability of being our greatest weakness. We can become so focused on becoming great we lose sight of the other areas of our life that deserve our attention. We focus on being a great athlete, business person, politician, actor, and so on, at the expense of our home life and spirituality. We let ourselves become defined completely by our occupation first and foremost, and therefore we define ourselves by whether we are successful or not by the metrics of our workplace, instead of the simple affirmation that we are children of God. Some of the dumbest, most idiotic, and narcissistic actions have been taken by individuals who want to go down in history as the greatest. Wars have been fought, bodies broken, relationships torn apart all for the sake of someone or group of people wanting to be the greatest according to the world's standards.
- VII. The disciples were caught in the act of discussing which one of them is the greatest. They are so human, and so much like us, its painful. It's almost like looking into a mirror at times. This debate could have only led to hurt feelings, or dividing the group between the inner circle disciples. Nothing good could have possibly come from this discussion. They are walking with God, and yet they are concerned with which one of them is the greatest. But they are having this discussion after a few of them witnessed Jesus' transfiguration, and Jesus healing a boy when the disciples were unable to do so. They have just failed, and so the next logical conversation for them to consider which one of them is who is the greatest.
- VIII. One writer suggests they have this conversation because, "They fear that they have fallen in Jesus' estimation. They are insecure at their failure to heal the boy. They hold resentment toward one another as Jesus chastises them. They are eager to compete to regain his approval. [But] to be great is not to impress the crowds with displays of

healing, or to try to become the teacher's pet of a Teacher who refuses to play favorites. It turns out that greatness lies in welcoming one who is not viewed as great by the culture, the child, the one who is beyond the circle, who needs a welcome."<sup>1</sup>

- IX. Today, we coddle and protect children like porcelain dolls, because if we push or lean on them too hard they will break. Yet at the same time, we don't listen to them when they desire to speak for themselves even though they may have something poignant to say. So while we treat children with love and care, and have child labor laws to protect them from injustice. We have a hard time taking those maternal and paternal feelings to the next step of actually respecting them as the individuals and people that they are. We tell them to wait their turn, when they are ready to step up to the plate to lead and teach; when they are prepared already to be the next generation of the church. In Jesus' day children had no status or privilege. To identify one's self with children was to embrace the lowliest, the least of society. In so doing, he was in effect telling the disciples that they would not gain favor or social status because they are his followers. From society's perspective the disciples would be considered last.
- X. I find it to be more than coincidence that this passage comes the same week we showed the Mr. Rogers documentary. I certainly didn't plan it this way. And not only that, but on Friday, Google celebrated the fifty-first anniversary of the airing of the first episode of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood with a "google doodle," where they change the logo on their main site to honor someone, and link it to a video on YouTube. It was a beautiful tribute to a person that spent his life striving to be great according to the creator's standards. In the documentary, producer Margaret Whitmer says, "If you take all of the elements that make good television and do the exact opposite, you have *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Low production values, simple set, an unlikely star. Yet, it worked." Fred Rogers looked at what was being offered to children and decided to do the exact opposite. In the 1960s that meant rejecting slapstick comedy, with pies in faces and watching people humiliate themselves. In the 1980s and 90s, it meant rejecting violent and loud cartoons, and other high tech shows. Instead, Mr. Rogers' show was slow and contemplative. One time he set an egg timer for a minute and then just sat there; silent for a whole minute just to show children what a minute truly was. In his show, sock puppets were the main attraction, and when I was watching, a senior adult was the star. Cutting edge television it was not.
- XI. But Fred Rogers did not care. He didn't start his show seeking greatness and honors from the world, but to serve children. He sought to provide them with quality, educational television that respected them, and to tell them that they were special, and that their thoughts and feelings had value. Don't get me wrong while he didn't seek greatness according to society's standards, he still sought to be the best. But "Jesus does not despise the desire to be first, but his definition of greatness stands the world's ordering of priorities on its head and radically challenges a fundamental human

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<sup>1</sup> McKenzie, Alyce workingpreacher.org, Lectionary Commentary on Mark 9:30-37, 2009

assumption about achievement.”<sup>2</sup> Fred Rogers sought to be the best at teaching children they were loved, and sharing one of the central messages of the Gospel to love your neighbor.

- XII. Jesus measures greatness not by success but by service. When we welcome the lowest of our society into our community. When we truly care and love for all of God’s children with the grace and steadfast love that he has shown each of us. Then, maybe just then, we can start considering ourselves to be great, but we should always remember that the greatest of all time lies ahead of us calling us to live according to the kingdom standards he set.
- XIII. My dreams of greatness according to the world’s measures of success have transformed since I was elementary school, to the desire to live a life where the highest honor would be for it to be said at my funeral service, “well done good and faithful servant, well done.” But if I’m honest with myself, it is still a constant internal battle, and probably will be throughout my life, greatness lies not in the accumulation of stuff, or garnering the best worldly titles but obeying the Lord, and characterizing ourselves first and foremost as his servants.

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<sup>2</sup> Williamson, *Interpretation: Mark* p. ??