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Binkley Baptist Church
September 23, 2018 | The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Year B | Mark 9:30-37| 60th Anniversary Celebration

I am honored to be here today and grateful to Keith Williams, Marlene Dickison, the entire 60th anniversary celebration committee, and Dr. McFaul for the invitation. The flowers on the communion table are beautiful – Wayne and Becky Robinson, I'm grateful for your unending support of my ministry. I also bring greetings from Greenwood Forest Baptist Church. We celebrate with you this morning and give thanks for your sixty years of faithful ministry.

The Measure of Greatness

My husband Adam and I are already vying for our four year-old son's loyalties. Isaac giggles hysterically as he runs back and forth from me to his dad. When he gets to me, he says what his dad has trained him to say, "Go Hokies!" When he gets to his dad, he says what I've trained him to say, "Go Duke!" I know, wrong crowd. You all will appreciate that Adam upped his game and has taught Isaac to say, "Duke is puke, Mom!" I'll admit that the phrase rolls off the tongue quite nicely, and it's one of Isaac's favorite things to say. We all have particular ideas of who we want our children and grandchildren to be when they grow up. We are concerned about what team they are going to pull for, what school they are going to go to, who they are going to marry, what profession they will choose. At the heart of all these desires are assumptions about how we measure greatness.

The disciples were loyal to a different vision of greatness than Jesus. In our text from Mark 9 this morning, the disciples respond to Jesus' teaching with silence because what he is saying is so different from the vision they've had for a Messiah. First century Jews had many different opinions about what the Messiah that they had hoped for would look like and do, but there was one thing they held in common: they believed that the Messiah would bring triumph and victory; the Messiah would defeat Israel's enemies; the Messiah would be great and restore Israel's greatness. They are afraid of what Jesus is saying; they don't

want to hear anything else about Jesus being killed or suffering because this isn't the vision of greatness that they've longed for.

It's ironic that while the disciples are on the road to the cross with Jesus, on the road to suffering, they are arguing with one another about who is the greatest. Their topic of conversation is demonstrating the exact opposite of what Jesus is calling them toward! Jesus stops in Capernaum, the place where many of his disciples grew up, the place where he did much of his early ministry so he can give them an opportunity to wrestle with their loyalties. When Jesus asks them what they are arguing about, they are silent again. They are embarrassed because they realize that their hopes and desires are in conflict with Jesus' teaching; they are loyal to the world's measures of greatness. Jesus sits down, calls the twelve over to him, and engages them in a time of teaching to help them better understand what it means to follow him. He says to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then, Jesus takes a little child, wraps his arms around the child and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." If the disciples want to be first, if they want to be great, they will need to learn how to be last, how to be servants, how to welcome children in Jesus' name. They will need to learn to live into Jesus' vision for greatness.

When we hear Jesus' words today, we probably think: "Aww, of course. Yes, we need to welcome children." In our culture, particularly in predominantly white suburbia, childhood is seen as a time of innocence and play, a time to be fully protected from the complexities of our world. But this is not some sentimental picture of Jesus cuddling children. In Jesus' day, people did not see childhood as some idyllic state. Children were seen as non-persons who should be with women, not hanging around a rabbi and his male

students. Roman authors gave very little information about children prior to adolescence, when they would have been finally seen as adults. Even medical writers showed little interest in children. When childless Romans wanted heirs, they commonly adopted adults rather than children. Children are inconsequential in Jesus' world. They were socially invisible. They had no rights. So, when Jesus tells the disciples that in order to be great, they are to welcome children, Jesus is saying they are to welcome the most vulnerable people in their society, and they are to treat those people like they would treat Jesus himself. Jesus' words find resonance with Gandhi who said, "The measure of a country's greatness should be based upon how well it cares for its most vulnerable populations." In order to be truly great, the disciples are to stand up for the most vulnerable. And as Jesus is making clear, this way of being in the world will demand that you resist the powers that be; it will make you reorder your loyalties; and it will quite literally get you killed.

There's a lot of conversation about greatness at a national level right now. Donald Trump won the presidency in November of 2016 with his promise to "Make America Great Again." Trump won people over by promising a return to a time before the loss of manufacturing jobs, a time before Islamic jihadism was on the forefront of our minds, a time before a black man could be president, a time before LGBTQ folks had rights like everyone else, a time before brown immigrants were so visible, a time before all the talk about white folks becoming the minority. As Steven Greenberg says, "The slogan worked well to unite people with an array of diverse fears, angers, and resentments."¹ This slogan tapped deeply into America's fears of anyone who was black or brown, anyone who was a stranger and immigrant among us, anyone who was other in any way. This slogan gains its power from a nostalgic yearning of white America to go back to a time when white people,

particularly white males, were unquestionably at the seat of power, a time when white people had not been dislocated, a time when white people didn't have to wrestle with other voices that sounded different from theirs.

While the greatness Trump describes is particularly problematic, he is not the only one who talks about greatness. Both Obama and Hillary talk about America as the greatest country on earth. And as we all remember well right now, Megan McCain just critiqued Trump in her eulogy for her father by declaring that America has always been great. Though their ideas about greatness are different, what they are most loyal to is a vision of greatness for America, a vision for one particular nation-state. But as Christians, we must be careful not to confuse the vision for American greatness with the vision of the kingdom of God. Sometimes I think we focus all our energy on elevating our favored political party and neglect to examine how our visions of greatness for our country come into conflict with Jesus' vision of greatness. I am not saying we should not try to make changes for the better with our votes, but I am saying that we have to recognize there is a difference between America's vision of greatness and the greatness to which Jesus calls us.

My daughter Hannah, who is five months old today, went places in utero that I never would have imagined. She was with me the day we held a press conference at Greenwood Forest and told the story of our member Gilles Bikindou who was detained at a routine check in at the Charlotte Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in January of 2018. As you may remember, Gilles fled his home country, the Republic of Congo, in 2004 for fear of political persecution because he had witnessed state-sponsored violence and murder. After entering the United States legally with an educational visa, Gilles soon requested political asylum in the United States. Gilles was denied asylum, but he was placed under an

order of supervision, which allowed him to work, drive, and live in the United States, and that order was renewed without incident until 2017, when the current administration rapidly increased the number of administrative arrests as part of a larger effort to reduce the number of undocumented and documented immigrants here in this country. Once Gilles was detained, we were terribly worried about Gilles' health and his ability to receive adequate medical care if he were to be deported to the Congo, so we helped him apply for a stay of removal which would have prevented his deportation for a year. That stay was denied by Sean Gallagher, the Atlanta ICE field office director less than two hours after it was submitted. The day we held the press conference we were pleading with Sean Gallagher to change his mind and reverse his decision to deny Gilles' stay of removal.

Hannah also went with me the day we held a prayer vigil at the Charlotte ICE office and denounced the evil actions and deception of Officer David Kunde, who lied to us by assuring us Gilles would not be detained at his check-in. Hannah went with me when we held a prayer vigil outside the Atlanta City Detention Center to call attention to the injustice being done in our country as we reminded folks that Gilles was just one of many folks caught up in the administrative arrests that were a direct result of Trump's executive order. Hannah went with me and my two associate pastors into the Atlanta City Detention Center, into a small, dark room with a small square glass window, through which we would see Gilles for the last time. Hannah was doing flips in my belly when I stood before my congregation and wept, giving them the news that just a few days after our visit with Gilles, he was deported.

The same month I gave birth to my beautiful daughter, the same month I sat in the safety of my home on maternity leave learning how to be a mother of two, our Attorney

General Jeff Sessions put out a memorandum calling for a zero-tolerance policy. Before this zero-tolerance policy, undocumented immigrant families who were seeking asylum had been released and went into the civil court system to make their case, but the zero-tolerance policy resulted in parents being immediately detained and sent to criminal courts and children being sent to detention centers. This resulted in about two thousand children being separated from their parents in just six weeks. Back in 2016, the average number of detained immigrant children being held by the Health and Human Services Department was four to nine thousand. As of this week, there are 12,800 immigrant children being held. While this zero-tolerance policy has been reversed, we continue to hold children in custody, and this past week what many of us feared came true: people who stepped forward to take care of these undocumented immigrant children who are still in government custody have been arrested themselves. ICE is using this reunification process as an opportunity to arrest more undocumented immigrants.

If Jesus were sitting among us teaching us today, he would say, "Whoever welcomes one immigrant child in my name welcomes me and the one who sent me." Immigrants and their children are some of the most vulnerable among us today. There are thousands and thousands of horror stories to tell. One thirteen year-old boy named Alejandro and his mother left Guatemala to seek asylum in the United States. This past May when they crossed the Arizona border, they were detained and separated for two months. Alejandro told a reporter his story. He says, "I wish I could forget about it. Like it never happened. A nightmare... It was a Tuesday when they took me. I felt anxious, worried.... It hurt me so much because [my mom] was the only thing I had. I was completely alone....I was in a shelter for two months. My mom, two months inside a prison. I thought I was going to be in

that place for my entire life. I felt oppressed, imprisoned. I became numb. I didn't enjoy playing anymore. I stopped feeling hungry. I couldn't do anything for my mother or even defend her...My mind was so frustrated that it would be 3 or 4 in the morning and I would be awake, sitting up in bed, thinking and thinking. I wish that all those children are inside there, get out....They made us feel special and everything...they played movies for us, games, they tried to do everything possible to get us to forget what was happening but you don't forget. The only thing I wanted was to get out of there as soon as possible...A child needs a home, a loving family, not to be worried."² His mother's words are just as devastating. She says, "They took [my son] and many children, and I couldn't do anything about it. I could feel my heart breaking. He doesn't want to leave my side because he thinks they are going to separate us again...He started to have nightmares. Now when I look at him, he is not the same. He doesn't have that brightness he always had. That enthusiasm. He seems a bit bleak. I consider the damage irreparable."³

What will it mean for us to welcome immigrants and their children in the name of Jesus? How will we do it? Do we currently have the power to welcome them? How can we walk in the way of the cross with Jesus and resist the powers that be so that we can welcome the most vulnerable among us? I feel like it's going to require more creativity than we've ever imagined. We are people with a lot of power and privilege. At Greenwood Forest, we had a lot of power and privilege to fight for Gilles. You, the good people of Binkley, our sister church, stood beside us, too. Your pastor, Dr. McFaul stood with us. Your very own David Price fought alongside us; he took action even though he knew his pleas would probably never be considered. We are eternally grateful for that. But even with all our power, we couldn't keep Gilles from being deported. Even with all our power, we are

sitting here as thousands of immigrant children live in detention camps separated from their families. How will we go forward and do all that we can to follow after Jesus who calls us to welcome the most vulnerable in his name? The call to resistance that is ahead for us is going to require creativity that we may have never imagined before. It's going to require a deep look at how we can become last and servant to all. It's going to require an honest look at our own power and how much of it we are willing to leverage, how much we may need to give to others, and how we can build power together to be able to act in ways that are hospitable to the vulnerable around us. It's going to require us to really wrestle with our own definitions of greatness. It's going to require getting our loyalties in line with God's vision for the world.

In our text for today Jesus says that the way to become great is to welcome the most vulnerable as if they are Jesus. Binkley, as you celebrate your sixtieth anniversary, your presence in the world is a testimony to this kind of greatness. When Binkley was just an idea, a dream in the minds of a few, it was hoped from the beginning that Binkley would be "true to the authentic Christian mission and at the same time would be effective and relevant to the community and world of which it would be a part."⁴ Through the last sixty years, you've been faithful because you've welcomed the most vulnerable as if they were Jesus. You've born witness to your faith in the midst of the evil in our world. I read your history. It's not been without pain, struggle, or conflict, but you have offered educational services to the poor, helped build youth recreation programs in places they were needed, given space so that a center for the developmentally disabled could have a home. You've helped with refugee resettlement, stood up for peace in a world that's constantly at war, held prayer vigils for people on death row, been a strong support for women in ministry,

been advocates for God's creation, been intentional in your conversations about racial reconciliation, licensed a gay man who was called to ministry long before anyone was truly advocating for LGBTQ folks. You've been insistent on respecting the universal church by welcoming people from other denominations and accepting their baptisms. Your stances have caused rupture with people and institutions that you've loved. Your stances have brought Fred Phelps to speak out against you! More than the laws of our land and the laws of denominational bodies, you've delighted, as Psalm 1 says, in the law of the Lord.

Only God knows what will be required of you for the next sixty years, but with the Spirit's help, you will find creative ways to resist the powers that be and welcome the most vulnerable in the name of Jesus. If you're like any congregation in America right now, you probably have moments where you long to bring back the good ole' days. The religious landscape has changed dramatically. I'm a Millennial, and I'm here to tell you there is no magic solution to getting the young people to come back to church. People engage with our congregations in different ways than they have in the past. I think the current state of religious affairs might actually afford us an opportunity to be more faithful than we ever have been before. What is going to matter most is our ability to find ways to creatively resist evil in our world and embody our welcome to the vulnerable. Our resistance will require political action on behalf of the last and the least among us, but it's going to demand something more of us than partisanship. We want the vulnerable to experience even more than equality, more than being held in the arms of Lady Liberty. We want the vulnerable to experience being beloved and affirmed in the kingdom of God, being held in the arms of Jesus.

Our resistance will require speaking up, asking questions; it will push us beyond the limits of mere tolerance to siding with the vulnerable and challenging those who do harm. Our resistance will require us to examine how our own power and privilege might blind us and contribute to the problem; it will demand us not to rely on the world's definitions of greatness but on what Jesus asks of us when he calls us to be great. It will call us to walk in the way of suffering; it will call us to be last, to give up our power, to become servants. Binkley, as you embark on the next sixty years, hold on to your legacy of always loving the most vulnerable. Let the Spirit guide you as you continue to seek to be loyal only to God's vision for the world, and remember that whenever you welcome the most vulnerable and witness to God's love for them by working with them to resist the powers that be, you welcome Jesus, and the God who sent him. That is how your greatness will be measured. Amen.

¹ Steven Greenberg, "Make America Truly Great Again" in *Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump*, edited by Miguel A. De La Torre.

² <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/20/politics/ice-arrested-immigrants-sponsor-children/index.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.binkleychurch.org/about/index/history>