

- As Christians we are called to be followers of Jesus Christ. Church people call it Discipleship.
 - But, too often, those same Church “people,” reduce following Christ to incessant nagging, endless guilt, and countless requests for money.
 - At yet, at another level, an intellectual level, a spiritual level, at the level of our minds and heart we really aren’t being asked for anything. Nothing that matters or adds value to our lives.
 - A trip with no direction, no mile markers, no end in sight.

- Our faith, our discipleship, **is** a journey following Jesus Christ, and it all comes down to simple steps, simple, but **not easy**.
 - These STEPS, are, in fact, life style choices essential to growing and strengthening our faith.
 - They’re not obligations but opportunities, openings to God’s love for us. As soon as we look at them as mere obligations, we weaken their potential effectiveness. Neither are they simply more to do: none of us need more to do. These STEPS are aimed at simplifying life rather than complicating it.
 - In order to grow in a relationship with Christ, a relationship in which Christ can comfort, support and guide us but also challenge, change, and transform us, these STEPS are all important to take.

- So in the course of this series, we’re taking a look at them.

- STEPS is an acronym
 - S is **serving** in ministry or on mission. Jesus called Himself a servant and that’s what He wants us, His followers, to be.
 - T is **tithing and giving**. God is generous. God is a giver and we can use our money to become more like God .
 - E is **engaging** which is about small groups, like our Connect Groups. Faith is **always personal** but it is **never private**. It’s lived out in a community of people supporting one another.
 - P is **practicing** prayer and the sacraments, looked at last week
 - S is **sharing** our faith. Our faith actually grows as we share this message with others.

- The step we’re looking at this week is a great one. In fact, Jesus promises that this step is the path to greatness.

- Most, if not all of us, want to be great, not mediocre, not simply OK but **GREAT**. Maybe not the sense of celebrity or fame and fortune but definitely in the sense of “best-in-class” kind of great.
 - Every mom here wants to be a great Mom, every dad want to be a great dad.
 - Every doctor, lawyer, engineer, and teacher wants to be great at their profession.
 - Every business leader wants to have a great business.
 - We all want to be great, in one way or another.
 - Given the choice between greatness and mediocrity, we’d rather be great.

- But, sometimes we may give up on greatness because it seems so elusive, and we are not sure we can achieve it, or it seems to come at too high a cost, or, we've tried and failed.
 - At least that's the way most of us feel. We feel like we're failing because:
 - We're not making the money or enjoying the promotions we're expecting.
 - We're acknowledging we don't have the skills we need
 - Our kids (present company excluded, of course!) are growing up to be ungrateful brats
 - And, perhaps, at the bottom of it, at the heart of it, we just don't feel all that great.

- ??Did you know that ultimately greatness is a **choice**?
 - Greatness is a step we can choose and every single one of us has a shot at taking that step.
 - To understand the choice for greatness and our STEP this week, we look to our Gospel from Saint Mark, a continuation from last week's passage.
 - Last week, Jesus and his disciples went on one of their walking trips, their missionary journeys.
 - As they made their way to and from their destination, Jesus would teach. After each journey they'd return to home base, a town called Capernaum, and this time, back at home, Jesus asked his disciples, "*What were you arguing about?*"

- On this particular journey, it seems that the disciples were arguing with one another, and Jesus, knowing full well the content, questions them anyway to challenge and create a teaching moment.
 - We find out why in the next verse: *But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest.*
 - Their thinking was conditioned by the assumption that one day soon Jesus is going to be king. And, as part of his inner circle, His entourage, His posse, as His peeps they could expect to enjoy positions of power and influence.
 - But, human nature being what it is, that's not enough. They're arguing about who's going to be first: to get the most power, have the greatest influence.

- Matters of rank are incredibly important to people and many jockey for positions of power and places of preference.
 - This goes on all the time:
 - Who's most important?
 - Who has the highest ranking?
 - Who gets the first class ticket?
 - It happens in all realms of life. We love to make lists and rank people and then figure out where we are in the ranking.
 - And that can be helpful, if it clarifies values and annunciates priorities, if we strive to work harder, to do better to move up.
 - But it can also be destructive and debilitating. In our flawed, fallen nature, we easily fall into the “comparison trap.”

- And it is a trap because when we compare ourselves to others, it can make us feel bad about ourselves (if **we** fail in the comparison) or bad about someone else (if **they** do).

- That’s what was going on with the disciples and Jesus wants to make clear that such comparison was unacceptable, especially as it leads to exclusion, as even John seeks to do: *“Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he doesn’t follow us.*
 - These teachings of Jesus are harsher than last week: warnings about the specter of Gehenna, harsh images of chopping off limbs and plucking out eyes.
 - Last week, if you’ll recall, Jesus did it far more gently, and, I would argue, far more effectively.
 - Remember, last week, Jesus sat down, called the Twelve closer around said...*If anyone wishes to be great...*
 - Please don’t miss this...*If...you want to be first, to be **great**...* That’s **great**. Jesus isn’t against aiming at greatness. In fact, Jesus tells us expressly how to do it. God wants us to be great.
 - It’s just that, as He does so often, Jesus takes the human definition of greatness, and turns it upside down.
 - *If anyone wishes to be great, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.*
 - Instead of being all about power **over** people, greatness about power **for** people, serve **to** people.
 - True greatness comes in SERVICE of others.

- Greatness means using my abilities, seizing any and all opportunities and leveraging my influence, and indeed, any other advantage or resource or skill I have, all for the benefit and well-being of another. Not just for me, not just for mine, but for others...
 - *Jesus placed a child in their midst, and putting his arm around the child, said to them, “Whoever receive one child such as this...receives me.”*
 - Jesus is giving a word picture here. He says, greatness is about serving others And the greatest kind of service is directed toward those who can do nothing for you in return.
 - Every act of service, large or small matters in God’s economy. Even a cup of water deserves a reward. That takes faith, though, doesn’t it? It takes faith to believe having a servant’s heart matters, even and especially when no one else sees or knows or it’s not received in the way it’s offered.
 - Serving people who can do nothing for us in return is crucial to growing in faith. Service is an attitude of the heart to be put into practice every day, as each opportunity presents itself.
 - But it is also something we must intentionally put on our schedules, and choose to do too. It needs to become a part of our life-style.
 - Service, the first of the five steps of discipleship comes in two ways: **Missions** and **Ministry**
- These words are often used interchangeably, but we’ve decided to use them in two different and distinct ways. When we say ministry, we mean serving our church family, in our pastorate family.

- It's giving some of your time, from time to time or, better yet, on a regular basis in service to the church.
- It's getting up out of the pew to serve in our community.
 - Those who minister in our new parking ministry which needed at Saint Mary's help us park safely and also create a sense of welcome.
 - The greeters doing the same at the doors as do those looking after the next generation in CLOW and the nursery or those visiting the sick and the elderly.
 - And obviously, many, many other wonderful ministries too numerous to name here.
- We've said from the beginning of this series that we're not trying to get everyone to take all 5 steps at once. But if ministry really is your next step you can get involved right away. Call the office or check the bulletin for diverse needs and opportunities for serving in ministry, serving in our pastorate community.
- We honor and remember one today who has done that faithfully for over 13 years. I don't think it is an accident or a coincidence that on the week we talk about service is the time we honor Mrs. Faye Williams as she retires...she's a great example of ministry, of serving our community, of placing the needs of others before her own, and at times, even those of her own family.

- When we serve in missions we mean service to beyond our parish.
 - Jesus gave us a specific instruction when it came to missions, calling us to be His *witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* (Acts 1.8)
 - Judea is about service in our own community (Saint Mary's, Saint Francis, Holy Family)
 - Samaria is about service beyond us in our own larger community (Brunswick, Lovettsville, Middletown, Myersville, even Frederick and Hagerstown), like our efforts at the Year Round shelter or through Saint Vincent DePaul
 - The ends of the earth is about service in other countries like our sister parish of Saint Martha in Haiti.
- If you're interested in Missions, whether it is service in the larger community around us or in other countries, or even if you just want to know more, contact Karen Nelson, our Director of Mission for more information.
- Missions and ministry are paths to greatness. We all want to be great. God wants us to be great too.
 - Discipleship is simply following the Lord, step by step, on the path of greatness following the Lord step by step...in the direction of discipleship.
 - A little bit more today than yesterday A little bit more tomorrow than today
 - And in the process discovering a more successful, great life.