

“REACHING FOR GREATNESS”

October 20, 2024 Mark 10:35-45

One particular day, bad weather had caused delays and cancellations throughout an airport system. Hundreds of anxious travelers were on standby. One of these passengers, a senior business executive, was desperate to get on a plane so he wouldn't be late for a meeting. He kept crowding the counter, trying to get the airline staff to do something to move his name higher up the standby list.

The agent had just put down the microphone, having said to the crowd for the third time: **"Those of you, who are on standby, please sit down and we will call your name when we have a seat for you."**

But this was a man who would not take **"maybe"** for an answer. He kept pestering the agent, explaining how important it was that he gets on the next flight. Finally, in exasperation, he asked her, **"Do you know who I am?"**

The agent had had enough. Picking up the microphone, she announced: **"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a man here who does not know who he is. Would someone please claim him, offer him a seat in the waiting area, and tell him I'll talk to him when it's his turn?"**

What is it about waiting in lines or delays at an airport that brings out the worst in people? It could be for many reasons, such as we are too busy

and don't leave room for the interruptions of life. But more than likely we have an overinflated sense of self-importance.

We begin life thinking we are the center of the world and everyone and everything should revolve around us. Then siblings come along, and the competition begins. Who gets to ride in the front seat, who's first in line, who got better presents at Christmas, who is mom paying more attention to? It doesn't stop there. Who gets picked first for basketball in gym class, who is smartest in the classroom, who is dating the captain of the football team? We take tests for scholarships, vie for jobs and jostle for the top positions in this world.

We all get caught up in playing who's the best and greatest game. The advertising world plays on this ego trip by telling "**You are the greatest.**", at least until they get our money.

The greatness game is nothing new. In fact, the disciples are playing it in our scripture story this morning. The **Sons of Thunder** is the nickname given by Jesus to disciples **James and John**. They are two of the first followers called by Jesus, a couple of guys in his inner circle who have a reputation for their quick temper.

Instead of the Sons of Thunder, these two brothers think it would be even better to be known as "**the Great Ones.**" So they walk up to Jesus and say, "**Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.**" Like, Jesus is going to fall for that one. "**What do you want?**" he asks.

So James and John say to Jesus, "**Grant us to sit, one at your right**

hand and one at your left, in your glory". They want a couple of prime cabinet posts in the messianic administration of Jesus, sitting in the seats closest to the very regent of God. Nothing would make them happier than having people look up at Jesus and his Dream Team, marveling at how great they are. Of course, when the rest of the disciples hear about it, they are none too happy. They want the seats of greatness too and are ticked off they didn't ask first. It causes such a ruckus that Jesus has to do a little conflict management.

There are a few problems with our quest to be great. The first is *a life of illusion*, and the second is *a state of confusion and the third it tends to divide rather than unify*. The **illusion** is that you are more invincible, powerful and righteous than you really are. The **confusion** is that you do not know the true meaning of greatness. The **divide** comes because we, in our quest to be number one, tend to make everyone else the competition.

I. ILLUSION OF GREATNESS

History is full of men and women who are described as "the Great,". Remember, **Alexander the Great? He** was the Macedonian king and general who took control of the vast Persian Empire in the 4th century B.C. He went on to achieve an undefeated record in military battles. But Alexander was not **invincible** -- he was probably brought down by a lowly mosquito. Evidence suggests that he died of malaria at age 32.

Then there was Ramses the Great, Catherine the Great, Herod the Great, let alone countless celebrities and athletes who want the title of greatest. Yet, history teaches that greatness is often linked to a life of

illusion, one which causes people to believe that they are more invincible, powerful and righteous than they really are. So many of the stories of these supposed great ones are filled with tragedy, great falls, and brief lives.

You would think we would learn the lesson, but even we get caught up the greatness game. It is an illusion to believe that happiness comes with having the most advanced job, trophy spouse, bigger house, expensive car, better gadgets and the greatest net worth.

Ambition – is not necessarily a bad thing. The drive to know Christ, to live with excellence, the desire to grow as a person, improve our skills and sharpen our understanding are good ambitions. Even the goal to be president of the USA or a company can be worthy ambitions. What counts is how you get there, why you want it and what it does to your soul along the way. The number one peril of greatness: **A life of illusion. Maybe that's why they call it blind ambition.** You are not as great as you think.

II. REAL GREATNESS

The problem with the disciples is they don't understand what real greatness is. "**You do not know what you are asking,**" says Jesus to the aspiring great ones, James and John. "**Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?**" Jesus senses that they are confused about what they are getting into, and he makes clear that the path to glory goes straight through the wilderness of sacrifice.

Are you able to die to self and be poured out in service to others? John and James replied, "**We are able**". The two come across as supremely confident, but you have to suspect that they don't know what they're talking

about. They're still confused about the path that lies ahead.

What's interesting is Jesus doesn't shoot them down but neither does he promise them what they ask. Instead, he nods in agreement. "**The cup that I drink you will drink,**" he promises; "**and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized**". He knows that they are walking the way of the cross and will give their lives for their faith in him.

But as for positions of honor, Jesus says: "**to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant**". Jesus can promise suffering, death and new life to all who follow him in faith, but the granting of special places in the kingdom of heaven. That's God's call, because God is in control.

III. SERVICE: THE HALLMARK OF GREATNESS

When the 10 other disciples hear what John and James are asking, they blow up at the Sons of Thunder. Jesus uses this squabble as a teaching opportunity and attempts to clear up any confusion about the true meaning of greatness. He begins by pointing out way that the leaders of the Gentiles act as tyrants, lording it over their people. "**But it is not so among you,**" he says; "**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**". Clearly, the key to being the greatest of disciples is to be a servant of others.

It's a simple message. "**Everybody can be great,**" said Martin Luther King Jr., "**because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.**"

It's not hard to understand what Jesus is saying here. Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. Then why is it so hard to do? The answer is something has to change inside us.

IV. CENTER OF CHRIST – INTERIOR CASTLE

The problem is our serving can easily become self-serving. Anybody can do an occasional service act for someone else. However, to live a life of service, with the attitude of being a servant is not so easy. A past president of Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship was once asked, “**How do you know when you have developed a servant attitude?**” His answer was, “**When you're treated like one.**”

Jesus tells his disciples “**For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.**” Since Jesus refuses to preach what he will not himself practice, he reveals that he is the model for this approach to greatness. Keep looking at Jesus to help us be servant minded.

St. Teresa of Avila was a prominent Spanish mystic, Roman Catholic saint, Carmelite nun and author during the Counter Reformation. In 1577, she wrote an insightful book called the **Interior Castle**, which serves as a guide for spiritual development through service and prayer. “**For if the soul is much with him, as it is right it should be, it will very seldom think of itself; its whole thought will be concentrated upon finding ways to please him and upon showing him how it loves him. This, my**

daughters, is the aim of prayer; this is the purpose of the Spiritual Marriage, of which are born good works and good works alone.

Therefore, sisters, if you wish to lay good foundations, each of you must try to be the least of all, and the slave of God, and must seek a way and means to please and serve your companions.”

I believe Teresa gets to the heart of all stewardship. It is a life centered on Christ. Out of that center flows service to others, generosity to others, and love for others. If our heart is set on Christ, service is a natural result. This is why prayer is so important. It gives us focus and opens us to the work of the Holy Spirit who changes our hearts.

One of the things I like about the Gospel of Mark is that he doesn't try to make the disciples look good. He shows them warts and all. We see their imperfections; selfishness, enviousness, blind ambition and as especially slow learners. These were ordinary guys. I can't help but wonder if Mark wants us to identify with them.

I think what sets them apart is they were loyal to Jesus. Despite all their character imperfections they were willing to follow Jesus. They believed in his Kingdom, they didn't understand it but, they had faith in him and that made all the difference.

In our political season of wins and losses, triumphs and failures, it can be easy to lose sight of this Christian approach to greatness. We too can get caught up in the illusion of the greatness game. But Jesus reminds us that the greatest among us is the one who serves -- not the one who wins an

election or a trophy, conquers an empire, modernizes a country or builds a glorious temple.

David Neff of *Christianity Today* tells of when he met a homeless woman who gave birth in a local hospital after living in her car. The hospital wouldn't release the little boy until he and his mother had a proper place to live, so David and his wife offered their home as temporary shelter. They soon discovered that she needed more than a roof over her head, however she needed to learn basic skills such as picking up and rocking her crying child and talking soothingly to him. So that is how they served her and her child.

What kind of greatness are you seeking? Are you still seeking to Lord over others or to serve others? Does your seeking bring people together or divide them? Remember, there is only one great one, and that one came to serve and give his life for all. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, October 20, 2024

Second Scripture Lesson

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, "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. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.