

YEAR B, PROPER 24

Job 38:1-7(34-41), Psalm 104:1-9,24,35c, Hebrews 5:1-10, Mark 10:35-45

ASPIRING TO GREATNESS

In preparing a sermon, as I first read through the lectionary, I am always distracted by first impressions. So I kind of need to deal with that before I can go to work on the real substance of the lessons. Today, that initial jolt, is the arrogance of James and John. Who in the world do they think they are? And just who is it they think they are talking to, that they expect to do their bidding like their personal servant? Here we have our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God. And we have two commercial fishermen, who were chosen to be two of only twelve people, in the history of the world, to be chosen by the Jesus, to be his closest companions. Now these two yokels, have the audacity to come up to Jesus, and say “ Hey Teacher – how about you do whatever we ask you to do?” Are you kidding me? Have these two been drinking? Now to his credit, Jesus doesn't smite James and John. But when the other ten disciples find out what these two did, they would have gladly reminded them of who is who, and what is what.

There is some context though, that makes some sense of what James and John did. Remember, these were an occupied people, under the imposed rule of the Romans. And Jesus was the Messiah – the One who was to come – the deliverer. Jesus came as the liberator, to free them from their bondage. James

and John came to believe that. They had hope, and they had faith, that at long last their people would be freed. But they vastly misunderstood what that meant. You see the Romans, like other rulers, ran the show. They made the rules, and they told everyone else what to do. They enjoyed the benefits of their rule, having the finest of everything, and being served by all under their authority. And while there may only be one king, there were all sorts of levels of authority, with those below, serving those higher up. The name of the game, was to be in the ruling class, and within that, to get as high up the corporate ladder as possible. That is the way the world works, and it has always been that way. James and John believed, in some fashion, that Jesus would be the new king. They were already among the twelve closest to Jesus. This was simply an opportunity to try to differentiate themselves from the other ten, and to literally be at Jesus' right and left hands. They simply did what we admire in our worldly organizations – they were asking for a promotion – and for recognition.

There are two things that make this a wonderful story. The first is that James and John were right! They should absolutely aspire to be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. Secondly, Jesus tells them yes! Of course it is outrageous, to ask to become the greatest of all in the Kingdom of God. But it is even more outrageous, for Jesus to tell them, yes, you CAN be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. And here is what you have to do.

This lesson is of course not just about James and John. It is about all of us. We too, should have the audacity, to seek to be the greatest in the Kingdom

of God. Based on their experience, and their knowledge about how the world works, James and John didn't understand that the Kingdom of God was different from the kingdoms of men. Their aspiring to greatness was more right than they probably knew. They were just pointed in the wrong direction. And so it is with us as well.

The first barrier to greatness, is the circumstance in which we find ourselves. In worldly terms, if the Roman Empire rules the world, I need to be a Roman. If white businessmen run the world, I cannot approach greatness, unless I too am one. If we want to be financially great, we have to be wealthy, or become wealthy. If we want to be politically great, we must be in the ruling class, or in the party of power. If I want to be a great sports hero, worshiped by millions, I have to possess the rarest of physical abilities. In worldly terms, unless we are born into, or get into the ruling group, no amount of effort is going to make us great.

In the Kingdom of God, there are no such systematic or circumstantial barriers to greatness. For our greatness is measured by our servitude. No one can claim, that their birthright or their abilities or their circumstances prevent them from serving God, by serving others. Indeed, we have all been given different gifts and different challenges. We have different realities, and vastly different lives. But our greatness, in the Kingdom of God, is limited only by the choices we make.

It is ironic, or interesting, or something, that James and John asked Jesus

for something they thought he could easily do. And it was. Jesus told them sure, you **can** be the greatest. Here is what you have to do. James, and John, and all of us, know too what we have to do. We have to be a servant to all. The question is whether we will do it. You may remember last week's gospel reading about the rich young man. He too wanted to inherit eternal life. And Jesus told him a similar thing. That eternal life - the Kingdom of God – was most certainly within his grasp. He had only to give away all of his possessions, and all of his money. In that story, it sounds doubtful that the young man was prepared to do that. But it is absolutely clear, that the door to the Kingdom of God is open to all of us. If that is truly what we desire, it is up to us.

The good news, is that we were born to be great – each and every one of us. However different we may be, we all have the ability to serve. I think Jesus shows us what true greatness looks like when in Matthew's gospel he says this: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom, prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For when I was hungry, you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least among you, you did it to me."

Serving God is as radically simple as serving others. This kind of greatness – profound greatness – lies within each of us.

We often will not see or be aware of this kind of greatness around us. True servants of God don't make a big deal of their service. Here is just one example from this congregation. Before moving to the northwest last year, Darrell was a member of this congregation for a dozen years. He chose to retire here from California. For 10 of those 12 years, this faithful man had an active prison ministry. Twice a week, he would visit various units at the Point of the Mountain state prison, bringing communion and leading Bible study. But because he did this during the week without fanfare, and rarely asked for any assistance, many never knew of his ministry. It is just something that he decided he wanted to do, and he set out to make it happen. Although he would certainly – and pointedly - deny it, Darrell was a great servant in this ministry, and I am humbled by his Christian greatness. As you know, there are many other similar examples of greatness in this congregation, examples of selfless service to others.

In February of 1968, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King preached a sermon on today's reading from the gospel of Mark. And he ends the sermon by considering how he might be remembered at his funeral. He was afraid that he might be remembered for accomplishments that the world considered great. And he prayed that he might better be remembered for things considered great in the kingdom of God. The following words are from the end of that sermon. Quote.

“I don’t want a long funeral. If somebody delivers a eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize – that isn’t important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards – that’s not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. I’d like somebody to mention that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I’d like for somebody to say on that day, that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody. I want you to say on that day, that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day, that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that’s all I want to say. If I can help somebody as I pass along, If I can cheer somebody with a word or song, If I can show somebody he’s traveling wrong, then my living will not be in vain. If I can do my duty as a Christian ought, If I can bring salvation to a world once wrought, If I can spread the message as the master taught, then my living will not be in vain.” End Quote.

This morning, we have a golden opportunity before us. We were created in the very image of Almighty God, and we were given by God, all that we need to become the greatest in the Kingdom of God. Our short time in this world will all too soon come to an end. And when we die, all of our worldly possessions, and all of our worldly praises and recognition, that we have worked so hard for,

and guarded so fiercely, will slip forever out of our hands. I pray this morning that with great joy and enthusiasm, we will aspire to greatness in the Kingdom of God. And that we are remembered in this world as faithful servants. Amen.