

## *Rethinking Greatness*

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Mark, Chapter 10:35-45

*James 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.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But 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?' They 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; but 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.'*

### I.

All of us have little things of which we are not proud, ambitions, little things we rather wouldn't share. Here it is, people, the confession for the week. Ready? When I was six years old, I decided to be president of the United States.

My plan was short-lived. My Dad told me that to be president *I had to be a natural born citizen, that is born in the territory of the US of A.* And since I had been born in India, with only one American parent, I could by virtue of a 1946 law be a US citizen, and I could TRY to have any *other* job I wanted, but president was out.

Truthfully, I've always been a little sad about that. Not that I would want the job now.... but, you know, I wouldn't mind having the *possibility*, should I decide, with the support of say sixty million of my best friends, that I *did* want it. I wouldn't mind the possibility of becoming the most powerful, well known, influential person in the world. After all, who doesn't want to be the greatest one of all? But the one job no immigrant or foreign born American can have is president.

Now as I've gotten to reflecting on the message of Jesus of Nazareth, I've started to question some of my six-year-old self's assumptions about what constitutes greatness. If I hadn't before, I would have to question after reading today's story from Mark's gospel. It's the story of people who wanted to be top dogs, not in the United States, which didn't exist, but in the world they hoped was coming, in the brand new Commonwealth of God. They aspired to greatness. Nothing so unusual there! Don't we all? And yet *their* aspirations to greatness may not sit so well with *his* message! Jesus has some assumption-busting things to say about what makes for true greatness.

## II.

Every age has had those great people to whom folk looked up: emperors and poets, conquerors, queens, sages, artists and discoverers. Whether in ancient Palestine, Egypt, China, or Greece, people have long looked to the "great ones" with a mixture of admiration and envy. In Europe's Middle Ages and Renaissance it was knights and saints, queens and kings. In long ago Arabia, I understand that to be the ruler you had to be a great poet too! If you couldn't write decent verse, or at least recite your lines, you just were not going to make it in politics.

From age to age, the images of greatness have shifted a bit, like the sands in the hourglass of human existence as time trickles on. But our love affair with greatness has remained.

All around us we see those who are set up by power and money as symbols of strength or high fashion, wealth or wisdom, success in sports, or most of all, winning the fight. All around we look to them to point the way to beauty, and might, approval and status, success and winning. But often they point to ugliness.

When Jesus and his entourage are on the road, two of them come to him with what has been on all their minds—for while Christ been preparing personally for a cross, they have been thinking about the grand new world order he will surely be bringing. And wondering about their wonderful roles in the commonwealth of God! But Jesus isn't having any, any more than when he caught them having the same conversation last time in chapter nine, when it was behind his back. Who's the greatest and who is the least, who is in and who isn't allowed in? The earliest disciples obsessed over the same questions that we humans have obsessed over from the beginning of history as we know it.

The world may teach you, Jesus is saying, that those who are great have others serving them. But I'm telling you that the servants are greater than the masters.... and that the greatest one of all is the one who chooses freely to serve humanity, starting with the weakest, the most vulnerable, the most oppressed, the most broken.

*When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So 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. But it is not so among you; 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. For the Human One came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'*

As Christians after two thousand years we have some confessing to do, on our own behalf and on behalf of our spiritual ancestors. Churches, like individuals, come to see themselves as great: wonderful signs of excellence and holiness. In the midst of this, the desire to get close to God often disintegrates into the desire to get close to power. And the desire to get close to power crumbles into petty competition and backstabbing and greed. We Christian "leaders" have sold the soul of Christianity again and again, all in the name of having a seat on the right hand and on the left of Christ.

Sometimes in pursuit of supposed greatness folks try to "purify" the churches—all in the name of being closer to Christ. What a weird contradiction to throw out the despised, the maligned, the heretic, and yes even the so-called sinner, all in the name of getting closer to Jesus in his glory.

After church today we will have a more conversation growing out of the broad topic, “Carefully taught to hate”. This time it is with Keith Lewis, who grew up in this church, as I understand it left the Church, and in adulthood helped to produce a fine movie about the abuse of power by churches—at terrible cost to those who are gay or lesbian, transgendered, queer or simply questioning.

We may have the finest liturgy, or the biggest mission-giving program, or the most sophisticated bible study or even the best music and preaching. But it is the quality of how we receive even one child or youth, in the name of Jesus, that is the measure of our greatness--or lack thereof-- in the eyes of God. If we want to be great, in the presence of God, there are no shortcuts to real servant ministry, hands on, loving, practical, real, with every child of humanity, every child of God.

### III.

For somebody like me, who thought when he was six he wanted to be president, and grew up knowing he could probably have any other job, this way of thinking means a radical re-orientation in how I go about the pursuit of greatness. I may fool the world into thinking I am the finest of the finest. But to borrow the words of Abraham Lincoln you cannot “fool all the people all of the time.” If I turn away one of God's children, I have flunked the Jesus' test for greatness. I may have great power and great wealth, or even great military might. But I will be measured in the high places of God by my hospitality, not by my hostility, by the quality of my service not the quantity of my resources. All the power in the world matters not a bit, if I fail to use what little I have in the service of humankind, starting from the bottom up!

Who is the greatest person you have ever known? Whether a movie star, a theologian or a political leader, the measure of greatness from God's perspective comes clear in our willingness to share what we have and who we are with all of God's children, but in particular, God's most vulnerable children. Stateswoman or nurse's aide, high school student or retiree, it is that readiness that counts. This kind of service is not about becoming a doormat. This is about opening up closed circles. It is about seeing people who have been invisible. It is about recognizing the humanity we share. It is about overcoming those difficult barriers: sexual orientation; social class; race; wealth; and age. It is about tearing down the dividing fences of privilege, for the sake of Love. Some of us have to do the tearing from the outside in—others start from the inside positions, and we need to do our work from the inside out.

Who is the least important and who is the greatest, who gets in and who gets left on the outside looking in? For too long churches have assumed unto themselves—ourselves-- the right to interpret holy writ on whether you or I have access to the grace and love of God, the right to participation, let alone leadership in the church. And yet that judgment isn't the privilege of either the doctors of the church or the bishops or even the street preachers or self-appointed apostles to render. That's not for any of us to decide—Jesus is quoted in Mark chapter 10 as saying it wasn't even *his* to decide who was going to be on his left hand and right in glory!

Once upon a time, a long time ago, a teacher appeared in a far off corner of the world. His followers wanted to make him a king, or at least set him on a pedestal, just like all the other great ones. He taught them something else instead.

The human one, he said, is going to have to be delivered into the hands of people who kill him, before he can be raised from the dead. Don't try to make me one of your famous people, he said. And don't try to advance to conventional greatness in my name. If you want to use my name, use it to welcome a child. Use it to serve those whom others fail to see. Use it to testify to love's power. Use it to call for justice for the most excluded. These are the marks of greatness.

A long time ago, this is what Jesus told his followers. It goes for you and me right now. These are the marks of greatness.

*“If anyone would be first, that one must be last of all, and servant of all.”*

*“For the Human One came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*