

Great Day!

Mark 10:35-45

The Nature and Purpose of the Church

Dr. Tom Jones, NPC Parish Associate and Ambassador-At-Large for Habitat for Humanity International
Sunday, June 8, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Come Holy Spirit, Come: Convict, Convert, Consecrate until we are fully and completely Your people---the church serving. Amen. One question: what does "greatness" mean to you? "Greatness." Visit the castles and colleges in England and Scotland. Usually there is a room called the "Great Hall." Most often this is a large, high-ceilinged, ornately decorated room. That is "great" in terms of size and decorations.

We speak of the "great" many persons who regularly attend Redskins games. That is "great" in terms of numbers—quantity. We speak of "great" in terms of quality: "great" beauty, "great" country, "great" surprise. We speak of "great" people: "Alexander the Great." Usually these are persons who are famous, extraordinary, well-known. Most often in our society these are sports heroes, entertainment stars, or political persons. Recently I saw an old re-run of Mohammed Ali's famous "I am the Greatest.!" What did Ali really mean by that?

What does "greatness" mean to you? Not just in terms of dictionary definition, but in terms of whether you have it or not?

I believe answering that question is what Mark 10: 35-45 is about. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus has just announced to the disciples that he will be delivered to the priests and scribes, that he will be condemned to death, delivered to the enemy. They will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, kill him. In typical human nature form, the disciples immediately think about themselves. James and John, those two crazy Zebedee brothers, ask Jesus for special seats of honor in the coming Kingdom. They think that where you sit in the Kingdom determines greatness.

I am glad the Bible reveals both the good and the bad about disciples. An artist was commissioned to paint a portrait of Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell had unsightly warts on his face. Thinking he would please Cromwell, the artist omitted the warts from the picture. Upon seeing it, Cromwell raged, "Take it away! Paint me warts and all."

Well, Mark shows us the disciples, warts and all. The warts in this story about James and John is not that they were ambitious; the tragedy is in the misdirection of their ambition toward their false concept of greatness. They totally misunderstood what greatness is. And that may be as major a problem as we face in our society.

During all my growing-up years in my home town, St. Petersburg, Florida, we had a famous Methodist preacher there named Wallace Hamilton. He was the "good guy" preacher. There is at least one in every community: the preacher you turn to when you want an invocation or a little talk or a benediction or whatever. So I heard Hamilton often as I grew up. For me, his most memorable sermon was one called "Drum Major Instincts." He said we all have the instinct: the desire to be important, to be significant, to be great, to lead the parade, if you please. He said there is nothing wrong with that instinct, this ambition to greatness, as long as we understand what true greatness is and channel the ambition in that direction.

The tragedy of James and John is they did not understand true greatness.

There are ten other disciples in this experience. Upon hearing the request of James and John, the other ten become indignant. However, theirs is not righteous indignation, but jealous indignation. They know that if James and John get the two special seats, they, the other ten, will not get them! So the controversy about greatest rages on.

That is, until Jesus in his usual direct, simple way steps in and declares once and for all the principle of greatness: "Whoever would be great among you, must be your servant." "Whoever would be great, must be....servant."

We confuse it, we try to compound it, we make it complex. Perhaps it is so simple and so direct and so threatening we cannot take it: "Whoever would be great, must be....servant."

I believe Jesus here presents the basic choice every person must make in life--you for you, and I for me: whether to seek greatness in this life according to the world's concept of greatness, or by Jesus' standard for great living.

The world's concept is that greatness is measured by popularity, applause, wealth, influence, power, position—by where you sit in this old world! In this world's idea of greatness through wealth, power, influence, gifts, personalities—our lives are used mainly for our own good. Oh, sometimes we include family and close friends, but that is the same selfish use! The worldly form of greatness is measured in how many lives you control through your wealth, influence and power.

Jesus' principle for greatness is in direct contrast: "Whoever will be great...must be...servant." In Jesus' Kingdom the standard of greatness is service. Greatness does not come in reducing others to your service, but in reducing yourself to their service.

Three quick truths about Jesus' standard for greatness: 1. It is available to every person, no exceptions; 2. It is guaranteed to bring happiness, satisfaction, fulfillment, real personhood; 3. You must choose for you, I for me. God will not force this standard of greatness on anyone. But overall, ultimately, the greatness which comes from selfless service is all that is truly great.

Our scripture in Mark 10 does not stop here. Jesus does not lay this load on us and leave us. He applies the principle to his own life: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life for others.

Over and over is the call of Jesus, "Follow me." Is there anything more clear than what it means to follow Jesus in true greatness? Not to be served but to serve—to give--for others. Clear, but oh, so difficult in our materialistic culture.

My basic conclusion is that the primary business the church is in is to help us become selfless rather than selfish—other-centered rather than self-centered, as persons; as church ;as nation; as society; as world.

There are a variety of options to make specific application of this teaching of Jesus concerning true greatness. In our limited time I would like to suggest two arenas for struggle; to start us on two avenues of application of Jesus' truth about greatness: one from the standpoint of the church; the other from the standpoint of you and me as individuals. Among the many concepts of the Church in the New Testament, perhaps none is more helpful than the Church as the "Body of Christ." In our context today the Church as Body of Christ finds purpose in the expressed purpose of Christ: not to be served, but to serve and to give for the sake of others. If we are the Body of Christ then our purpose is the same as Christ's. In other words, a great church is a servant church.

Some years ago a large Presbyterian congregation in another state involved itself in an extensive self-study. After months of study, the most significant learning was that the congregation existed not for self, not to be a spiritual country club interested mostly in serving its own members, but to serve the needs of the world. It expressed its purpose in these words: "We exist for the sake of others: our direction must be outward, not inward toward ourselves. As corporate entity—as a body--as a congregation--we are great to the extent we give ourselves to the service of others." Five years after deciding that a great congregation is a serving congregation, that church had come to use over 50% of its money, people, staff and facilities resources for helping those not in the congregation. It began to fill needs for volunteers all over its metropolitan area; it was key to organizing a huge on-going effort to alleviate hunger; it began what was reported to be the largest Senior Citizens' effort attached to a congregation anywhere in the United States; it took stands in favor of human rights, applied particularly by standing tall in a controversy over racism

in schools; it used its facilities for dyslexia workshops, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, crippled children's activities, Recovery Inc., American Association of Retired Persons activities, recording for the blind studios, youth center, high school diploma programs for adults, English classes for those whom English was a second language; housing, feeding, sleeping, entertaining overseas students from colleges all over the country who had no place to go for Christmas vacation; and many more such outreach activities. All of this and more happened because a church took seriously its reason for being—that as the Body of Christ, its purpose is the same as Christ's "Not to be served, but to serve and to give for others." That is the secret of a great church.

Once the famous preacher Phillips Brooks was asked, "Mr. Brooks, if you were called to be pastor of a church that was completely dilapidated, run down, and about to fold up, what would you do?" Brooks thought for a moment, then said, "I would do three things. First, I would gather together whatever people I could find; I would preach the best sermon I could by the Holy Spirit's power, and I would preach it on missions; Then I would take up an offering for work overseas."

A "great" congregation is one whose purpose is not to be served, but to serve. "Others, Lord, yes, others." But in an important sense, becoming a servant congregation is dependent upon the extent to which we as individual members of the Body take seriously the call to great living in our own lives. What would happen if all of us in this room right now took seriously--I mean really/honestly took seriously God's call to servant living? I cannot speak for you, but my personal struggles about this lead me to realize, for me, a variety of ramifications:

- "Not to be served but to serve" has much to do with how I think about and act toward other persons—those with whom I work, play, live—those who are strangers. Whenever in honesty I catch myself feeling superior to any other person, it is a caution-flag time for servant living.
- Great living means struggle with the ways I use whatever skills/ talents/ experience I have. When I find I am using my life to answer the question, "How can I get ahead?" it is caution-flag time for servant living.
- At my age in life a difficult struggle is to avoid excuses, rationalization, protection of myself. "I've gone so many places to preach sermons and teach classes and give lectures and attend meetings and do consultations. I've given my service. Let the younger ones—let the Doug's and the Juniors and the Mitch's and the Mikes's do it for awhile!" But there is nothing which allows that in the call for great living. "Whoever would be great must be servant" ---today and in all the tomorrows!
- Where the rubber really hits the road for me,--- I guess the most difficult and comprehensive test for servant living ---is in the way I use my money. Truly my money is me in a spendable form. The way I spend my money does symbolize the way I am spending my life. In our culture with its focus on materialistic things, the use of money, I believe, is the acid test—the most difficult test of great living. I believe the truth of Scripture is that there is no great living until you and I learn to give unselfishly, even, especially, of our endeared money.

Because of the marvelous results I have witnessed in persons who learn to give unselfishly, and conversely the horror stories I have seen in the lives of those who are selfish, without apology, I say, "Do not ever be afraid to ask anyone to give anything to or in the name of the God in Jesus Christ." We may not feel comfortable with that; we may not like it; we may be embarrassed by that; we may be afraid to do that. But the reason Jesus, in the New Testament, talks more about giving than any other one subject, is not because Jesus is money mad, but because Jesus knows the huge barrier selfishness is to relationship with God. "Not to be served, but to serve" even, especially, in the use of our endeared money.

The late William Barclay put this all rather straight for me: "The basic trouble in the human situation is that persons wish to do as little as possible and to get as much as possible. It is only when persons are filled with the desire to put into life more than they take out, that is, to serve others, that life for themselves and for others can be happy and prosperous...the world needs people whose ideal is service....that is to say the world needs people who have realized what sound sense Jesus spoke."

In one of his "On the Road" interviews, the late Charles Kuralt spoke with a gentleman who had invested

his own money to buy land along a well-traveled road to turn it into a public park. He purchased picnic tables, grills, and the like. The park is for anyone who wants to use it. Every day the man every day put tomatoes and other fresh vegetables. and fruits on the park tables for anyone to eat and enjoy Kuralt interrupted, "Why to you do all this?" Came the reply, "If you don't leave the world better than when you came, what's the sense of your being here?"

In a world of fear of terror, overhung with nuclear and chemical clouds, in the midst of wars and rumors of wars, struggling with realities of global warming, filled with computer screens, permeated by economies undermined by wild greed, floored by economic recession, filled with national and personal fears to protect all we/I have: Christ's call to selfless living makes the contrast sharp and the right decision clear.

A young Scotsman complained to his pastor, "I'm fed up with the church and Christianity. All I ever hear is 'Give, give, give.'" The pastor, Donald Ross, fixed his steel blue eyes on the young adult, and in his soft Inverness accent replied, "Well can you think of a better definition of Christianity than 'Give, give, give?'"

The Christian Gospel begins with a gift: "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son..."; It is manifested in the One who came "not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life for others."; And it continues with a claim on the lives of those of us who would respond to God's gift. "Whoever would be great must be servant of all."..... So.... now that you know how, have a great day! Andnow that we know how, let's be a great congregation!