

The meaning of Greatness
Mark 10:35-45

I have a question for you: Why did you come to worship today? What motivated you to get yourself organized, move away from a comfortable chair, put down the Sunday newspaper, and make your way to Calvary in order to be here at this moment? It takes some effort to participate in worship. It never happens by accident.

I have a second question for you. Why are you an active member of this parish? We live in a time when many people flee any kind of commitment, avoid community, and refuse to volunteer for anything. You certainly do not enhance your social status by participating in a church anymore and because of COVID, we have spent the last 20 + months cocooning ourselves in our homes.. And yet people like you regularly share in the gathered Christian community, you support the work of this parish with your gifts, and many of you work in many quiet ways to further Christ's mission and ministry here at Calvary.

We look at surveys to see why people do not go to church. Some of the reasons will break your heart. On the other hand there are a variety of reasons why people go to church...perhaps to gain a favor from God, perhaps to satisfy a spouse or to appease a parent, perhaps to deepen a friendship. Some use it like a visit to a shopping mall...you want to get something you need, kind of a full-service mini-mart, a place to pick up the spiritual resources you need in a quick, efficient manner.

Others come to church for mood alteration...to get a sense of forgiveness when they feel particularly inadequate or to seek comfort in the midst of grief and disappointment. Many come to church for encouragement when they feel depressed, confident when they feel afraid, and inspiration when their lives grow stale.

Our gospel lesson today focuses our attention on two brothers , James and John, the sons of Zebedee, or, as it is also translated, the Sons of Thunder, which might mean they were loud and windy. They did argue quite a bit.

These disciples wanted positions of importance in the church. They had done the majority of the work with Jesus and on many occasions, were the only disciples that Jesus took with him. He involved them in the healing of the daughter of the Synagogue ruler. They were praying with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, and were with Jesus at the Transfiguration.

Matthew tells this story but he has Salome, the mother of James and John, ask Jesus to give her sons positions of importance in the coming Kingdom. Matthew must have thought it was not becoming for an apostle to make such a bold request. Mark, however, is more honest. He wants us to understand that the disciples were not perfect examples of virtue but were ordinary people.

The lesson also gives some valuable insights into James and John. They may have been lowly fishermen, but they were very ambitious. These brothers wanted favored position-seats on Jesus' right and on the left-when he came into this kingdom because they were a part of the inner circle. In a way they stand out for being boldly opportunistic, but all of the disciples were dreaming about when Jesus might win out over his opponents. James and John were confusing worldly greatness with spiritual greatness. Clearly though, they believed in Jesus and placed their confidence in his leadership.

But the great value of the Gospel is the manner in which it reveals what Jesus means when he speaks of greatness, a designation quite different from the way the world uses that word. For Jesus greatness is defined by total, unconditional trust in God. What is more, Jesus tells James and John...greatness is measured in service, in spending our lives for the sake of others.

How do we measure greatness? Our world tends to define greatness in terms of power, privilege and prestige. We measure the importance of a person by external markers - the house they own, the car they drive, the flamboyant nature of their lifestyle. We are impressed by the visible achievements of people, their prestigious honors, and academic degrees, the importance of their profession, and sometimes the accomplishments of their children.

But when Jesus speaks of greatness he inevitably links it with service. As he said to James and John, what makes us great is not our ability to rule over others, but our ability to invest ourselves for the welfare of others. In a world where most people want to put as little as is necessary into life and to get out as much as possible, our Lord speaks of a better way.

Jesus calls us to that better way today. Only when we are willing to put more into life than we take out...only then, Jesus tells us, are we worthy to be called his followers.

In a wonderful poem, Rudyard Kipling speaks to this issue of greatness, which is at the heart of our gospel lesson.

If you stop to find out what your wages will be and how they will cloth and feed you. Willie, my son, don't go to the sea, for the Sea will never need you.

If you ask for the reason for every command, and argue with people about you, Willie, my son don't you go on the land, for the land will do better without you.

If you stop to consider the work that you've done and to boast to what your worth, dear, angels may come for you, Willie, my son, but you will never be wanted on earth, dear!

I believe that the church finds its validation not in its public rituals, nor in what we say about social issues, nor the quality of our theology and teaching. The church establishes its credibility through its acts of mercy and kindness - a cup of water to the thirsty, the bag of groceries to the distraught, the life-giving support when we walk with someone who can go no farther without a champion.

How important it is for our community that they can come and visit our Mustard Seed Thrift Store for household items, our Blessing Box for food, and our Book Box for reading. Many people are helped through the discretionary fund, the first Tuesday of each month, with food cards and utility and rent bills. Let's also continue the collection of socks for the nursing homes, and coats for those in need during the cold weather. We must remember God calls us to remember the poor, and marginalized in the world. In doing so, you will be an effective example in word and action, in love and patience, and in the holiness of life.

Once upon a time in a far-off country, a king had twin sons. One was strong and handsome. The other was intelligent and wise. As the ruler grew old, everyone wondered which son the king would choose as his successor.- The strong son or the wise son.

In this land the sign of kingship was a royal ring. Just before the king died, he had a copy of the royal ring made and presented both rings to his twin sons. The chief advisor to the king asked him, how shall we know which son wears the authentic royal ring?"

You shall know, answered the king, because the chosen one will reveal his right to rule by his self-giving service to our people.

And Jesus said, Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all

For some time now, either Deacon Geri or myself have said at the conclusion of our liturgy...our worship has ended-now our service begins. Let that be our hope as we hear those words. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. For if that is our intention, then we can truly say and mean...Thanks be to God. May it be so.