



“Measuring Greatness”
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Scripture: Mark 10:35-45
October 18, 2009

A professor at a small Midwestern college wants the best for his students so he loves to engage them in discussions about greatness. Encouraging them to set their sights high, he challenges them to aspire to be their best selves. The professor wants his students to strive for excellence and to hunger for greatness. He rails against puny ambitions that lead to meager accomplishments and disparages low expectations that are easily attainable. Each lecture comes with a warning: “one day you will regret it, if you don’t strive for greatness.”¹

But how do we measure greatness?

Humorist Dave Barry recalls his summer internship in Washington’s corridors of power. Shortly after arriving in Washington, he discovered that even among young people, being a good guy was not the key thing. What mattered most was your position on the great Washington totem pole of status. Way up at the top of this pole is the president; way down at the bottom, below mildew, is the public. In between is an extremely complex hierarchy of government officials, lobbyists, lawyers, and other power players. These people hold thousands of minutely graduated status rankings differentiated by extremely subtle nuances that only Washingtonians are capable of grasping.

For example, people in Washington know whether a person whose title is “Principal Assistant Deputy Undersecretary” is more or less important than a person whose title is “Associate Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary,” or “Principal Deputy to Deputy Assistant Secretary.” They always seem to know exactly how much status everybody has. How they know this is one of the impenetrable mysteries of the universe.

Barry said this hierarchy is obvious at any party inside the beltway. The parties he attended in college were carefree. The parties he attended in Washington were serious. Everybody made an obvious effort to figure out where everyone else fit on the status pole, and then spent the rest of the evening kissing the feet of whoever was higher.

Today, Barry has good friends in Washington and he realizes – as Delawareans do – that not everyone who works there is a status-obsessed brown-noser. But, he knows, as you and I know there are still way too many people who cannot get over how important they are.²

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark indicates that James and John, two young men who lived in the Middle East 2000 years ago, and had little, if any, formal education, could fit in easily with today’s Washington elite. They understood hierarchies and positions of honor. They knew how their culture defined greatness and they had their minds set on attaining it.

They marched up to Jesus and blurted out, “Teacher, we have something we want you to do for us?”

Jesus replies, “What is it? I’ll see what I can do.”

“Arrange it,” they said, “so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your glory – one of us at your right, the other at your left.”

There’s nothing subtle about their approach! No buttering up Jesus with bold words about their loyalty to neither him nor warm sentiments regarding their feelings for him. Just a brazen grab for glory. “Jesus, we’re aiming high and we’d like to secure the top rungs on the ladder.”

The text says that as soon as the other 10 disciples heard about the request, they were incensed; presumably because James and John had beaten them to the punch. They had always pictured themselves in those top seats. How dare James and John attempt to edge them out!

It’s noteworthy that Jesus did not pull James and John aside and reprimand them for their request. He knew that all twelve had similar ideas about greatness, and he did not admonish any of them for desiring to be great.

I suspect he appreciated their passion and was glad to hear that they were setting lofty goals. Jesus wanted them to understand that following him required determination, discipline and sacrifice. Any worthy goal demands a firm resolve. He did not want his followers to be content with whatever the world dished out. He was driven to change lives and to change the world, and he wanted his followers to possess similar tenacity. But Jesus also realized that his disciples were confused about what constituted greatness. So, as he did on numerous occasions, he took the wisdom of the world and exposed its shortcomings. He wasn’t trying simply to puncture the disciples’ aspirations he wanted to redirect their energy to a more rewarding path.

Jesus said, “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.” We know this truth all too well. If we attain a position of power, it becomes very tempting to misuse our authority. Our head begins to enlarge and swells out of proportion. We enjoy our position of privilege and become accustomed to people catering to us. But danger lurks nearby, because when we possess power, it’s easy to believe that the rules that apply to everyone else don’t apply to us.

There have been several people in the news lately, whom the world has labeled “great,” who have been exposed for misusing their stature. While touting family values, Senator John Ensign was having an affair with the wife of his good friend. Film director, Roman Polanski, was arrested in Switzerland, 30 years after he had sex with a 13 year-old after plying her with drugs and alcohol. Yet after he was arrested, numerous celebrities rushed to his defense, arguing that his artistic success makes him a great one in the eyes of many, and thus he deserves a reprieve from the law. Representative Charles Rangel forgot to report tens of thousands of dollars to the IRS. It was all just a minor oversight by another great one. Late night TV celebrity, David Letterman, actually managed to amuse his audience in his confession to multiple affairs with women who work under him.

When greatness is defined in terms of power, privilege and prestige, it’s not surprising that people in positions of authority might expect special treatment. And it’s not surprising that they would become confused and bewildered about the goals they should pursue and what genuinely constitutes a rewarding life.

One of America’s early pioneers, Daniel Boone, was asked if he had ever gotten lost in any his explorations. He replied, “Ain’t never been lost; but there was this one time when I was bewildered for three days.”

Well, some of the people our world considers “great” seem bewildered and disoriented. They fail to understand what makes life genuinely rich and satisfying. Jesus redefined the meaning of greatness. He said the one who is great is not the one who is served, but rather the one who serves. It’s not the one who seeks recognition and praise; it’s the one who extends herself for others. It’s not the one whose basic orientation toward life is to look inward; it’s the one who looks beyond himself for opportunities to help others.

How much different life would be for John Ensign, Charles Rangel, Roman Polanski and David Letterman if they understood that greatness is not a matter of ruling over others, but of living on their behalf.

Christ does not call on us to lower our goals, he challenges us to pursue *worthy* goals. He does not try to deflate our ambitions; he wants to raise them by redirecting our energy to the things that make a positive difference. When Christ urges us to serve the needs of others, he wants us to never underestimate the power of a kind gesture, to never minimize the impact of a charitable gift, and to never disregard the significance of a helping hand. Greatness is measured in serving because it lifts the spirits of others while filling our own lives with joy.

John Hersey’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Bell for Adano*, was written during the Second World War and based on a true story. It’s about an American major, Victor Joppolo, who is in command of the small Sicilian town of Adano following the American invasion and occupation. Mussolini’s Fascist forces had been driven out, but for more than a decade, all of Italy and Sicily had been under the control of the Fascists. Major Joppolo is a good man, who works hard to replace the town’s bell, which had been taken by the Fascists and melted down for bullets. His first task is to meet with the town’s officials: the mayor, the police chief and civil servants – all of whom previously had worked with the Fascist regime. All of them had become accustomed to being treated with great deference, if not fear, because of their authority.

Major Joppolo gives them a little lesson in democracy. The Fascist police chief had arrested a woman for not showing him proper respect. The police chief had walked up to the head of a long bread line where people were waiting to get food and the woman had argued with him, shouting, “You’re no longer in charge here!” He pointed to his uniform, arrested her, and hauled her into the major’s office.

The major speaks to the town officials, acknowledging that they used to be Fascists, but now they live in a democracy. He says, “Perhaps you do not know what a democracy is. I will tell you. Democracy is this: democracy is that the people of the government are no longer the masters of the people. They are the servants of the people. The people pay the taxes out of which you are paid. Therefore you are the servants of the people of Adano. I, too, am their servant. When I go to buy bread, I walk to the end of the line. You too must behave as servants, not as masters.” And then he added: “Remember, you are servants of the people of Adano now. And watch: this will make you happier than you have ever been in your lives.”³

Christ wants us to get the most out of life and to feel deep satisfaction in our souls. And that’s within our grasp if we learn to measure greatness in terms of service.

NOTES

1. Paul J. Wadell, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” in *Christian Century*, October 6, 2009, p.19.
2. Dave Barry, “Dave Barry Goes to Washington” at <http://www.thisisawar.com/LaughterDaveWashington.htm>
3. John M. Buchanan, “More Than Happy,” May 21, 2006, quoting from *A Bell For Adano*, pp. 45-46.

