

The Greatest *Mark 10:35-45* | 10/21/2018

Sons of Thunder. That's the nickname given by Jesus to James and John, the sons of Zebedee (Mark 3:17). They are two of the first disciples called by Jesus, a couple of guys in his inner circle. Sons of Thunder: An awesome name for a motorcycle gang. Or a rock band. But these two brothers think that it would be even better to be known as "the Great." So they walk up to Jesus and say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (10:35).

Are they being presumptuous? Yes. Narcissistic? Probably. Out of line? Absolutely. You might want to shake your head at their arrogance, but the request they make is really not surprising. When you believe that you are the greatest, you're naturally going to make such demands.

Think of our mid-term election candidates, entering the final weeks of a long and punishing campaign. They would not aspire to the highest offices in the land if they did not believe that they were the greatest. And they've spent years approaching rich donors and saying, in effect, "I want you to do for me whatever I ask of you." Many of these donors immediately pull out their checkbooks. What does this tell you about presumptuous behavior? Instead of being discouraged, it's rewarded!

So James and John say to Jesus, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (v. 37). They want a couple of prime cabinet posts in the messianic administration of Jesus, sitting in the seats closest to the very regent of God. Nothing would make them happier than having people look up at Jesus and his Dream Team, marveling at how great they are.

But there are a couple of problems with being great. The first is *a life of illusion*, and the second is *a state of confusion*. The illusion is that you are more invincible, powerful and righteous than you really are. The confusion is that you do not know the true meaning of greatness.

First, the illusion. History is full of men and women who are described as "the Great," although they all had their weaknesses and blind spots. **Alexander the Great** was the Macedonian king and general who took control of the vast Persian Empire in the 4th century B.C. Tutored by Aristotle, he went on to achieve an undefeated record in military battles. But Alexander was not invincible -- he was probably brought down by a lowly mosquito. Evidence suggests that he died of malaria at age 32. How about **Catherine the Great**? She was the empress who ruled Russia from 1762 to 1796. Her greatness was grounded in her modernization and expansion of Russia's holdings, and her creation of the country's first school for girls. But Catherine was not as powerful as she thought. Her rise to domination came only after her lover led a coup to depose her husband. Another mighty ruler was **Ramses the Great**, Egyptian pharaoh from 1279 to 1213 B.C., who built cities, temples and monuments. The Bible does not portray him as so righteous, however. He was likely the pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites and caused Moses to lead the exodus out of Egypt.

History teaches that greatness is often linked to a life of illusion, one which causes people to believe that they are more invincible, powerful and righteous than they really are. Alexander was vulnerable to a mosquito, Catherine owed her power to a coup, and Ramses was unrighteous. All were "the Great," but not the greatest. Other contemporary examples, although not tagged with "the greatest" moniker, but people whose arrogance led to their disgrace include the Enron principals, Bernie Madoff, Mark McGwire, Lance Armstrong, etc. No doubt you can think of a slew of others who fall in this category. The number one peril of greatness: A life of illusion.

Problem two: A state of confusion. Namely, confusion about the true meaning of greatness. This second problem is one that Jesus addresses in the gospel of Mark. "You do not know what you are asking," says Jesus to the aspiring great ones, James and John. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (v. 38). Jesus senses that they are confused about what they are getting into, and he makes clear that the path to glory goes straight through the wilderness of suffering.

Are you able to drink the cup that *I* drink, asks Jesus -- the cup of my blood, shed on the cross for the forgiveness of sin? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism that *I* am baptized with -- the baptism of dying and rising, one in which suffering and death always precede joy and new life? John and James reply, "We are able" (v. 39). The two come across as supremely confident, but you have to suspect that they don't know what they're talking about. They're still confused about the path that lies ahead.

Jesus doesn't shoot them down. Instead, he nods in agreement. "The cup that I drink you will drink," he promises; "and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized" (v. 39). He knows that they are walking the way of the cross, which will lead to suffering for all and to death for some. The book of Acts tells us that James was later put to death by the sword, on the order of King Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2). He was the first of the apostles to be martyred for the faith. As for John, he too suffered under the persecution of Herod Agrippa. Tradition says that he lived a long time and died of natural causes in Ephesus. You might say that he gave his life *to the faith*, but did not have to give up his life *for the faith*. James and John. Both suffered. One was martyred. They drank the cup and experienced the baptism.

But as for positions of honor, Jesus says: "to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant" (Mark 10:40). Jesus can promise suffering, death and new life to all who follow him in faith, but the granting of special places in the kingdom of heaven? That's God's call, because God is in control. When the 10 other disciples hear what John and James are asking, they blow up at the Sons of Thunder. Jesus uses this squabble as a teaching opportunity, and attempts to clear up any confusion about the true meaning of greatness. He begins by pointing to the way that the leaders of the Gentiles act as tyrants, lording it over their people (v. 42). "But it is not so among you," he says; "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" (vv. 43-44). Clearly, the key to being the greatest of disciples is to be a servant of others. And since Jesus refuses to preach what he will not himself practice, he reveals that he is the model for this approach: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (v. 45). Let there be no confusion about who is "the Great," says Jesus. It is not Alexander or Catherine or Ramses. Instead, the one who is great is the one who serves.

In this political season of wins and losses, triumphs and failures, it can be easy to lose sight of this Christian approach to greatness. But Jesus reminds us that the greatest among us is the one who serves -- not the one who wins an election, conquers an empire, modernizes a country or builds a glorious temple.

Politicians can certainly help society through public health measures and economic investment, but Christians are in a much better position to assist people with personal support and skills. David Neff of *Christianity Today* (February 2012) tells of when he met a homeless woman who gave birth in a local hospital after living in her car. The hospital wouldn't release the little boy until he and his mother had a proper place to live, so David and his wife offered their home as temporary shelter. They soon discovered that she needed more than a roof over her head, however -- she needed to learn basic skills such as picking up and rocking her crying child and talking soothingly to him. So that is how they served her.

Instead of living *a life of illusion*, know who you are: A fragile human being with limited power and righteousness. The truth is that none of us is the Greatest, but we serve a Great God. With Christ's forgiveness and inspiration, we can have a powerful impact -- especially if we serve others through our support and our skills.

And rather than enduring *a state of confusion*, know the true meaning of greatness: Service to others. "Everybody can be great," said Martin Luther King Jr., "because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love." Everybody can be great because anybody can serve.

True for James. True for John. True for any one of us.

Pastor Keith