

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

A Different Kind of Greatness

Mark 10:35-45

Everybody likes the idea of being important, finishing first, being known as the best or the greatest. At least I think everybody does. We like the feeling of being recognized. We don't like the feeling of being ignored. We like the thrill of victory. We don't like the agony of defeat. We enjoy the sense of power or accomplishment. We don't like feelings of weakness and loss. That's particularly true in athletics. Watch any sports event, you'll see fans waving an upraised index finger at the camera. "We're number one!" they scream, even when they have a losing record. Everybody likes winning, coming in first. Everybody enjoys feeling important.

Can't help but think of that when I hear this story about James and John. Aside from their boldness in asking — which few of us would dare to do — they represent us well. The other disciples certainly identified with them. You can sense their anger and indignation. "Just look at those two. Who do they think they are, anyway?" they seem to have thought. But the truth is, they all were probably thinking the same way. Mainly, they were upset because James and John got there first. They would have liked to be first. They just didn't have the boldness to ask as James and John did.

Jesus was upset, too. Like anybody who's ever been approached that way, Jesus was cautious in his answer. You can sense his reserve. They asked him for a favor. "And what might that be," he replied. What is it you want me to do for you, as if he didn't know. But what upset him, I suspect, is the realization that his disciples hadn't yet understood, didn't yet comprehend who he was and what he was about. He was almost out of time. Jerusalem was on the horizon. This might be the last opportunity to bring them all on board. "What is it you want me to do for you?" he asked.

Well we all know what they wanted. Truth is we want the same things they did. Consider your own desires, your own ambitions, your own careers. Now I know there are people who don't want to be leaders. I know folks who don't like the limelight at all. Nevertheless, I don't know anybody who doesn't feel good when honored or recognized. So even people who don't want to be in positions of honor may feel jealous of those who are. Those feelings of jealousy or envy betray them as just like those who are bolder in seeking leadership. James and John wanted to feel important, to be important, to have positions of prominence, to be chosen first. The other disciples were jealous of them.

I remember a man, a leader in my Buffalo congregation, telling me about his younger days in the church. He told me about being elected to be a deacon. Deacons are the service arm of church leadership, but they don't have any governing authority. It wasn't long, he said, before he realized that if you really wanted to run the show, if you really wanted the power to govern the affairs of the church, you had to be an elder. The session had all the power, he said. Those were the words he used, as I recall. So he went to the nominating committee and said he didn't think he was cut out to be a deacon. He wanted to be an elder. He was a take-charge kind of guy. He wanted his hand on the controls. Wouldn't tolerate anything less.

The funny thing is, he was right about himself. I can't imagine him in the role of deacon. He was indeed a take-charge guy. He really did belong on the session. He really was a good leader. But that's beside the point. The problem was, that he really had no idea what he was telling me about himself. He simply didn't understand that his idea of leadership in the church was fundamentally flawed. Perhaps James and John were strong leaders, too. We really can't say they weren't. Nevertheless, Jesus told them that they didn't know

what they were asking. They really didn't understand leadership as Jesus understood it. Nor did they fully anticipate the cost of discipleship. Despite having been with him for months, perhaps even years, they really had no clue what he was up to.

I remember talking to Will Carl, my pastor, shortly after I decided to go into the ministry. He had encouraged me when I was growing up. He had planted the seed when I was in middle and high school. So I naturally assumed he'd be pleased by my decision. Instead he grilled me about how serious I was. He wanted to know what I saw as my ministry. He noted that everything I said, I could do without being ordained. In fact, he said, his personal experience was that being ordained got in the way of his ministry. So while not really discouraging me, he sought to prepare me for a future that I really could not imagine. I don't regret my decision. I'm happy to be a minister of the gospel. But I still remember being surprised that he challenged me the way he did.

Truth is, none of us really knows what we're getting into when we decide to follow Jesus. Who of us imagined being asked to tithe our income? Ten percent? Are those Stewardship people serious? Sad to say, most of us gave up on that ideal long ago. But I promise you another chance early next year. Furthermore, those of you who accept that invitation will be quite amazed by the grace of God. And when it came to being faithful to Christ, all of us were overconfident. We were certain we could handle whatever came our way. Why? Because that's the way we've been brought up. That's the way we think. We think in terms of competence, of power and greatness. Leadership, in our view, often means telling others what to do instead of working alongside them. We haven't yet grasped the mystery and wonder of the servant life. How could we? Few of us even know people who truly are servants. Thus, we don't really comprehend servant leadership.

There's a story about George Washington. I don't know how factual it is, but stories don't have to be factual to convey great truth. It seems that one day during the Revolutionary war, Washington, who was not in uniform, rode past a group of soldiers repairing a stone fortification. Their leader was shouting instructions, but making no attempt to help them. When asked why by the rider he obviously didn't recognize, the leader replied with great dignity, "Sir, I am a corporal!" Washington smiled, dismounted and proceeded to help the exhausted soldiers. When the barrier was completed, he turned to the corporal and said, "Corporal, next time you have a job like this and not enough men to do it, send for General Washington. I'll come help you again."¹

We've all known leaders who, like the Corporal, lord it over people and act like tyrants. But Jesus says to us, "That's not the way you are to do things in the church. Whoever wants to be first among you, must be your servant." Note that he doesn't say whoever wants to be first among you must be a servant. He must be your servant. That is, the leader among the people of God is the servant of the people of God. That doesn't mean the leader shouldn't lead or make decisions. But it does mean the leader must always remember that he or she is one of the people.

Of course there's a flip side to that. A minister friend of mine once noted that some members of his church seemed to think they were his boss. In short since they saw the minister as their servant, they acted like tyrants over the minister. He began to say to them, "It is true that I am your servant, but you are not my master." They, too, misunderstood what Jesus said. Not like Gentiles who lord it over each other. Whoever wants to be great among you, must be your servant. We're all in this together, you and I. And when we learn to see the servants as truly important, when we aspire to be one of them. . . Well, that's when we'll have caught on to what Jesus was telling his disciples long ago: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Jesus advocates a different kind of greatness, the greatness of being one with him in service to God and neighbor.

¹ Today in the Word, March 6, 1991. as told by Rev. Brett Blair, www.sermonillustrations.com., Illustrations for October 22, 2000, ChristianGlobe Network, Inc.