

Date: October 15, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 28

SERMON: That's Great!

Text(s): Isaiah 52:13-15; 53:7-13; Mark 10:35-45

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One of the adjectives we use to express approval and admiration of someone or something is the word “great.” Abraham Lincoln was a “great president.” Vermeer was a great painter. Tom Brady is a great quarterback. Bono is not only a great entertainer, but a great humanitarian as well. It seems the term great encompasses at least two qualities or criteria: talent or accomplishments and recognition of that talent or those accomplishments by the public, or at least a substantial subgroup of the public.

I suspect most of us probably harbor or have harbored a secret or not-so-secret longing for greatness. Even preachers are not immune to the desire for greatness. One young pastor in his first parish, was getting really discouraged because his congregation didn't particularly appreciate his sermons and weren't shy about letting him know it. It wasn't that he had a bad delivery or that his sermons were not well-prepared. It's just that he was too young to have much to say. His sermons displayed his book-learning, but not a great deal of the wisdom that only can be acquired by living longer.

It happened that he was a great admirer of the sermons of the late Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, the well-known

British pastor of City Temple in London during the middle of the 20th century. So in his desire to scale the heights of homiletical greatness he began to cheat a bit. He began preaching Weatherhead's sermons as his own; oh to be sure he camouflaged them—changed details and added local color, etc., to make it appear that they were his sermons— but the essential content was straight out of Weatherhead. I suppose he rationalized it by figuring that it was probably better that the congregation hear something substantial from Weatherhead than something trivial of his own. The congregation was somewhat mystified at the radical improvement in his preaching, but they didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth, so they just decided to enjoy it and not ask too many questions.

One Sunday morning, just after he had launched into his latest adaptation of one of Weatherhead's sermons, an elderly man came in the door, walked haltingly with his cane down the center aisle, and sat down right in the front pew, directly in front of the pulpit. Just as the young minister wound up his first point and delivered it with a rhetorical flourish, the old man, chuckled, looked around at the congregation and in a loud stage whisper said, “That's Weatherhead.”

Of course, this rattled the young preacher, but he forged ahead gamely. As he came to the conclusion of his next point, the old man nodded his head, looked around, and said in an even louder voice, “Yep. That's Weatherhead.”

By the third time this happened, the

young fellow had had enough. He leaned over the pulpit and sputtered at his tormentor, “Old man, shut up!” With a look of absolute triumph on his face, the old man turned around and announced, “That's himself!”

I wonder, though, if the definition of greatness that I mentioned at the beginning— talent or accomplishments and public recognition— is really what greatness is all about. I wonder if those two things are really more properly a definition of fame, and if we don't frequently confuse fame with greatness. Sometimes the two go together; someone who's famous may also be great, but I suspect that we really tend to treat the two interchangeably. True greatness is something other than mere fame.

At least that's what both of our lessons today suggest. Both introduce us to a notion of greatness that flies in the face of popular opinion. In both the portrait of the “Servant of the Lord” that the prophet Isaiah paints for us, and in the sayings of Jesus about greatness in our gospel lesson, we encounter some rather radically different notions of what it is that makes a person great.

Jesus' disciples, like us, seem to have confused being famous with being great. It's understandable, perhaps. After all, they'd gone from the daily drudgery of gutting fish and mending nets and maintaining boats as fishermen on the Sea of Galilee to traveling around with Jesus seeing new places and attracting crowds

of curious listeners. As Jesus became more widely known, they became known too, if only by association. People would point at them and say, “Oh, there's James and John. We used to buy fish from them. Aren't they lucky to be able to go about with him?” They were achieving fame by association and confusing fame with greatness.

We've seen this pattern many times over, haven't we? In the entourage of any public figure, especially one who's famous, are people who become puffed up with their own self-importance. The famous person may wear his or her fame lightly, but the hangers-on, the groupies around them are often insufferable.

So James and John, begin to believe their own PR, and they come to Jesus and ask for a favor. That in itself is innocuous enough. Jesus asks them, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Their reply is either infuriating or laughable. “We want you to grant that one of us will sit at your right hand and one of us at your left hand when you come into your Kingdom.” We want to be Prime Minister and Secretary of State. What *chutzpa!* Well, if you don't ask, you don't receive, I guess. No point in aiming too low.

Mark makes it clear that their desire to be great arises from pride and self-centeredness, rather than from some better motive. And we just know that this kind of pride is going to result in James and John being shot down in flames. It

reminds me of the story about the two ranchers from Texas who were bragging to each other about the size of their respective operations. One of them said, “Well, there’re 15,000 head of cattle out there on the range, all wearing my `Flying A' brand.”

“Flying A!” the other one sniffed. “My brand is the Bar T, Circle L, Cross Creek, Flying Z, Bent Fork, Double Back, North Canyon brand.”

“Wow!” said the first rancher. “How many head of cattle do you have wearing that brand?”

“Well, not so many as you do,” the second rancher confessed. “Not that many survive the branding.”

James and John don't survive the branding too well either. First of all, Jesus reacts in a far stronger and more negative way than they anticipated—“You have no idea what you’re asking,” he tells them bluntly. But if they don’t, their fellow disciples certainly do, and react angrily to this naked ambition of James and John.

But Jesus doesn't settle for simply putting James and John in their place. He doesn't humiliate them or send them back to their fishing nets in disgrace. Instead, he uses this opportunity to teach them about what greatness is really all about—greatness, that is, as God counts greatness rather than as the world measures it, a greatness that is not the same thing as fame at all.

So Jesus called them, and said to

them, "You know that among the Gentiles, those who are rulers, lord it over their subjects. But it shall not be so among you. Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must become the slave of all.

What an incredible statement! Doesn't sound like any definition of greatness we're familiar with. No promise of one's picture on the front page of the newspaper or air time on TV. No hint of lucrative bonuses or promotions. No lure of power or political preferment. Instead, an almost nonsensical statement that being great means being a servant to other people. Greatness doesn't mean climbing to the top of the ladder, but stooping at the bottom in order to assist someone else who's fallen off or who's trying to get on.

And then follows a statement which may well be the single most important statement in the Gospel of Mark, the one statement that clues us in to all that Mark wants to say about Jesus and about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus: It's Mark's punchline. “*For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” Not to be served, but to serve, and to give one's life to set others free. What a revolutionary notion! What a mind-boggling idea! And yet, as soon as we hear it, we recognize it as simply one of the truest statements we've ever heard. Of course that's what real greatness is. How could we not have seen it before?

In both Jesus' words and in the prophet Isaiah's oracle, greatness is not talent or accomplishments and public recognition. It's a commitment to serve others, even to the point of accepting a painful cost that such service may entail.

I'm sure most of us here remember the deaths in 1997 of two women who were much in the news— Princess Diana and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. They died within five days of one another, and through the technology of modern communications, we were able to watch both funerals live on television. (Diana's life and her death are apparently going to be in the public awareness again very soon, if the previews and reviews of the new movie where Helen Mirren stars as Queen Elizabeth is any indication.) Both were famous in their own way, and Diana had even paid a well-publicized visit to Mother Teresa not many months before her tragic accident. It was Diana, the more glamorous and tragic figure who got the lion's share of the media coverage, who was, and is, mourned by millions. In Paris, where Diana died, just a couple of blocks from where our apartment, for at least two years after her death, crowds of people gathered at the spot to leave flowers, messages, some of them sentimental, some of them moving, some full of religious devotion, and some of them truly bizarre. It's still a place where many tourists want to visit. Diana's funeral in Westminster Abbey was full of pomp and grandeur. The funeral service for Mother Teresa in a soccer stadium in

Calcutta, was a rather rambling pedestrian production by comparison. And yet, where do we recognize true greatness? Where did we have the impression that the mourners were standing on holy ground? I'd guess that most of us would recognize that in the life of Mother Teresa, who died with two extra saris as about all the material legacy she left behind, we saw a greatness rarely equaled. We saw some power, some light in her that most of us can barely even guess at. It was out of the misery, out of the squalor, out of the grinding poverty she encountered in the streets of Calcutta that Mother Teresa fashioned what Malcolm Muggeridge called "something beautiful for God." The beauty was not in the poverty or squalor; the beauty was in the loving service which she rendered in the midst of it. And it's why we recognize in her the greatness and heroism that transcends the usual sort of greatness that the world confers.

Though it's well known to many of you who have been in the congregation a long time, some of you who are newer may not know that many of the social agencies such as Mid-Coast Hunger, the Tedford Shelter, Hospice, and the Oasis Free Clinic owe their existence to the leadership, energy, and financial support from our church working in conjunction with other local faith communities.

It's not enough, however, to be a church with a history of servant leadership. The challenge is to keep finding new ways to reach out and serve

others in Christ's name. Our Council and Committees are wrestling with that very issue in our conversations. We're not content to simply be the church with the beautiful building that graces Maine Street or the wonderful and enriching music program. We're committed to finding new ways to serve. Our congregational meeting two weeks ago, at which those present unanimously voted to commit ourselves to raising half the cost and providing volunteer labor for a Habitat for Humanity build here in Brunswick is a positive step in that direction. The measurement of our greatness as a community of faith, as it is for any church, will not be a history of past service, both individually and collectively, but whether that commitment to serving others is ongoing and visible.

There are no formulas for becoming great servants. Greatness will be called forth from us in the moment when we're confronted by the need of another, and we set ourselves to serving that need for Jesus' sake, regardless of the cost. That's great. I think that may even be what it means to be a Christian.