

Lectionary 29 (B)
October 17, 2021
Text: Mark 10:35-45

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This morning, Jesus wants to redefine how we think of “greatness” and what we imagine a great person to be like. We live in a culture where people go absolutely gaga about celebrities and those they perceive as great—the famous, the powerful, the wealthy. Usually this kind of exalted status is thought to be rooted in some extraordinary intelligence or insight or skill. Those are people who rise above, who occupy a higher plane of existence than the rest of us. Jesus says humbug to all of that. Jesus wants us to know in our bones that real greatness is all about love. You can see true greatness when a person tends to the needs of a neighbor, when they serve their fellow human beings.

According to Jesus, being great has absolutely nothing to do with rising above to be admired by others. Instead, really being a great person looks more like bending low to give our attention and care to another. In fact, to make his point, Jesus uses the most shocking image he can. The greatest one of all will be like a slave when it comes to serving others. At first I wondered whether, because of our unique American history, the image of slavery might be more offensive and disturbing to us than it was when Jesus used it. Maybe, because slavery was so common in the ancient world, maybe it was more “normal” for Jesus to speak like that. But then I came across this quote for Plato: “Slavery is the opposite of happiness.” So no, I don’t think it’s possible to minimize the offensiveness of Jesus’ words. This is just typical Jesus, using the most inflammatory language he can muster to light a fire in our hearts—a fire that is all about clarity, about seeing our lives truly so we won’t waste this precious gift of life God has entrusted to us by being focused on things that have no real value—like the things our culture imagines make for greatness.

Those who have learned to see the world clearly, through the lens of Jesus’ wisdom, will recognize that the values the world runs by are rubbish. Jesus says, “You know how it is—the ones people recognize as rulers dominate and exploit those under their power; and the ones people call great are oppressive tyrants.” And I wonder if it might be helpful to take a look at the sort of person Jesus might have had in mind when he said that—someone like Alexander the Great. Here it is more than 2300 years after his death, and we’re still referring to him as “great.” I suppose it’s not hard to appreciate why. In just 13 years he established the largest empire the ancient world had seen. It stretched from Greece in the west to Egypt in the south, all the way to India in the east, more than two million square miles. He spread Greek language and culture, so that they served as unifying forces for trade and commerce for hundreds of years. He was never defeated in battle, even though he was frequently outnumbered, and demonstrated extraordinary personal bravery when leading his troops into battle. His strategies and tactics continued to be studied for generations. He had great charisma and a forceful personality. More than 20 cities were named for him, and he left a huge imprint on the world. He was definitely a historically significant person.

But—how many hundreds of thousands of people died in his wars just to feed his ego? How many children grew up without a father, without a mother? How many suffered in poverty and hunger as a direct result of the global disruption caused not only by his wars but also by how he managed his empire? How many communities were completely destroyed? What benefit could possibly justify so much pain and cruelty unleashed on the world? All so that Alexander could imagine he was a bigger man than his father? As a person, Alexander was known for his violent temper, his impulsivity and paranoia. He was a raging alcoholic with delusions of grandeur, evident in his desire to be worshiped as a god. Yes, he was a great military commander, but in his case how is the end result really all that different from being a great serial killer? Instead of Alexander the Great, maybe he should be known as Alexander the Monster.

I picked Alexander as an example, but there are so many others to choose from—there's Herod the Great, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Frederick the Great; and then there's Suleiman the Magnificent and William the Conqueror, and Napoleon and Genghis Khan—every one of them just another verse in the same sad song. And even though Alexander belongs to the ancient world, I hope he can shed a bit of light on some of those that our culture might think of as great. Whether it's John D. Rockefeller of Standard Oil, or Sam Walton of Walmart, or Steve Jobs of Apple Computers or Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, they are all ambitious, historically important people. But to the degree that they loved their innovations and their business models and their profits more than their fellow human beings, they are not great people. They're merely historically significant—sort of like Charles Manson is historically significant.

Jesus isn't condemning ambition and he's not slamming everyone who is ambitious. He's just redirecting our ambition toward things that really matter, toward things that are a source of blessing for individuals and for the communities we live in rather than things that serve only self. Jesus is directing our ambition toward a way of living that has a real impact, with powerful, maybe even eternal, significance. True greatness is being part of the cure and not part of the disease. The path of true greatness will not look like that of Alexander or any of the other so-called "greats." Instead of rising above to dominate and exploit others, you will bend low, like a slave, to attend to the need of another. Your plans can be interrupted by someone else who needs you. You won't always put yourself first. Jesus wants us to see how only that kind of life is genuinely great.

I can tell you that, without doubt, the most important, most consequential people in my life have been those stopped to really listen, who were able to be interrupted when I was confused or had hit a dead end. My second grade teacher who had such a warm and understanding way about her when I was having trouble in school; the seminary intern at church when I was in 9th grade and was having a difficult time with my mom; a colleague who shared really helpful insights from his experience when I was dealing with congregational conflict; and the list could go on and on—the youth group sponsor, the track coach, the hospital chaplain. Those people are the ones who, in my life, are truly great. I wonder who those people have been for you.

Dear children of God, I have seen that kind of greatness in so many of you. Every single one of us is able to be great like this. Every single one of us can care for someone else, can let their

need interrupt our plans. Every single one of us can not only aspire to, but achieve true greatness. And here's where the power and perspective come from to bend low to attend to our neighbor in need. Jesus has shown us the way, and even more than that, he has stooped low for us—to share the troubles of life with us, to hear our cries, to claim us as his beloved children, to forgive our sins and embrace us with his love forever. Our Lord does not lord it over us, but reaches out to us with his healing touch, and pours out his life to make us whole. And he shows us what true greatness really is. Thanks be to God. Amen.