

## IF YOU WOULD BE GREAT . . .

(09/27/09)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 9:30-37

*He [Jesus] sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35)*

What do you want to be? What do you want to do with your life -- with whatever time remains for you? What are your goals? What is important to you? When you die, whether it happens many years from now or later this afternoon, how will you feel about your life?

If you are conscious at the point of death, which I hope to be, will you be able to look back on your life with a sense of deep satisfaction, with a sense of joy rather than despair, with a sense that you lived your life fully rather than wasted it, with the sense that you accomplished your goal or purpose in life rather than frittered away the precious time entrusted to you?

In a conversation with one of our parishioners several months ago, she mentioned that when she reads the obituaries she is struck by how much some people have done with their lives. She said that she really hasn't accomplished that much compared to others. She facetiously said that she had better get going, had better start doing things so she won't feel embarrassed when people read her obituary.

I was glad she was kidding because we are more than our accomplishments. I hope she knows that. I was also glad she was kidding because, like many of us, she has done a lot with her life, at least in the terms of our scripture lesson this morning. I hope she knows that.

When I attend Assumption College commencements, which I do occasionally, I note the advice given to the graduating seniors by the guest speaker. The graduates are usually told that their life is spread out before them. They can do whatever they want. They can accomplish great things. They can make a difference in the world. They can become whatever they want to become. It's all up to them.

I am somewhat skeptical. By age twenty-two the life path for young people, whether they are college graduates, high school graduates, or the alarmingly large number of young people who fail to finish high school, is already fairly well established.

By the time of my college graduation I realized that, despite what the commencement speaker said, I would probably never get to play third base for the New York Yankees. I would probably also never be a nuclear physicist, a concert pianist, or a ballet dancer. I still had time to figure out who I was and what I wanted to do with my life, what I felt called to do with my life, but my options were already narrowing.

Sigmund Freud, who was the oldest child in his family, once said that first-born children have a sense of destiny, the conviction that they are supposed to do something special with their life. That was true of Freud. It was also true of me. I had the sense that I was supposed to do something special with my life. I just didn't know what it was. It took some time to figure this out. By the way, I am still working on it.

As our scripture lesson opens this morning, Jesus and his disciples are passing through the region of Galilee. Jesus does not want to be recognized by the crowds, for he wants to spend time alone with his disciples. He wants to teach them, to prepare them for their ministry. He has only a short period of time with them, perhaps only a year or two; then he will be gone. If they get it, they will continue his teaching and healing ministry. If they don't get it, his message and even his memory will fade away.

If Jesus, as a first-born, wanted to become someone great, he did not go about it in the right way. He spent entirely too much time alone in prayer or meditation, too much time focused on individual healings that were often conducted in private, too much time with this small band of relatively undistinguished and clueless followers.

There is a story about a conversation between Jesus and the archangel Gabriel that took place in heaven shortly following Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Jesus is walking down the golden street with Gabriel. Both are deep in thought.

Gabriel speaks first. "Master, you died for the whole world, did you not?"

"Yes," Jesus answers.

"You must have suffered much."

"Yes."

"And do they all know about it, all these people whom you love and for whom you gave your life? Do they know who you are and do they understand your teaching?"

Jesus replies, "No. Actually only a few people in Palestine know anything about me or my message -- at least so far."

“Well, Master, what is your plan for spreading your teaching throughout the world? What is your plan for leading people from darkness to light? How do you think the people of the world are going to come to know you, to know your love for them, and God’s love for them?”

Jesus replies, “Well, I asked Peter, James, John, Andrew and a few others to tell people about me and about the kingdom of God. These people will hopefully tell others, and the others will tell others, and yet others, and still others, until the whole world knows of God’s love.”

“Yes, “ says Gabriel, “but suppose Peter loses courage. What if John and James simply forget? What if the others are just too caught up in the busyness of their own lives to carry on your ministry? What then? Surely you must have a back-up plan!”

In a very quiet voice Jesus replies, “Gabriel, I have no other plan. I have no back-up plan. I am counting on them.”

As recorded in our scripture lesson, Jesus tells his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer and die that he may rise. He is talking about himself, but he is also talking about them. He is talking about himself, but he is also talking about us. Mark says, “But the disciples did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

The disciples do not understand. By now, they are probably becoming a little embarrassed at their lack of understanding. They don’t understand the teaching about what it means to die to your self, to your self-centeredness to be born in God. They don’t understand most of the parables. Instead of asking Jesus what he means, they withdraw into their own conversations. They become lost in their own concerns, their own agendas. They argue among themselves.

They come to a house in Capernaum. When they are settled, Jesus asks them what they were arguing about on the road. They become silent, realizing that what they were discussing has nothing to do with the message that Jesus has just entrusted to them. They are embarrassed. The question Jesus asked is rhetorical; he knows what they have been discussing. Note that he does not scold them for being clueless. He simply answers their question. He resolves their debate by casting it in a new light.

Jesus knows that the disciples want to be special. He knows they want to be great. He knows they want to be important. He knows they are already comparing

themselves to each other, trying to decide who is the greatest among them, who is the Master's favorite, who will sit on his left hand and his right hand in paradise.

Jesus calls the twelve to sit with him, and then calmly, patiently teaches them a lesson about greatness. He tells them that if they would really be great, they must become small, like a little child. If they would really be first, they must become last. If they would become important in God's eyes, they must become nothing in human eyes. Instead of trying to become a lord or noble, they should aspire to become a servant.

Not many of us will be great, at least not by the standards of the world. Most of us, like the parishioner with whom I spoke, will need to scramble to put together an impressive obituary. But do we want to be great in the eyes of the world or great in the eyes of God? Do we measure ourselves by what my field education supervisor, the Reverend William Rees, called "secular standards of success?" Or do we measure ourselves by the depth of our spirituality, the depth of our faith, the depth of our relationship with God? Which will be more important when we are at the point of death?

Think about the implications of this for us as individuals and also for us as a church. Do we want to become a great church? I think it is fine to want to become a great church. Jesus doesn't say there is anything wrong with wanting and trying to be great. All he says is that we should do this in the right way.

What we need, both as individuals and a church, is to be clear about what kind of people we want to become, what kind of church we want to become. As individuals, do we want to be great in the eyes of the world: important, successful, and rich? Or do we want to be great in the eyes of God: a disciple, a servant with the spirit of a child? Do we want to become a great church as measured by secular standards of success, i.e., to be big and powerful? Or do we want to be a great church in the eyes of God, i.e., a servant church, a church that welcomes everyone, a church that believes in the power of prayer, a church that is engaged in mission, a church where its members are committed to the spiritual journey?

Discipleship is not about attaining a position of honor, either in this life or the next; it is about serving others just as Jesus did. If we, like the disciples, lose sight of this fundamental truth, we will become discouraged. We will miss the greatness that is

ours, the greatness that is within our reach. We will then adopt other goals, secular goals, standards of greatness that are easier to achieve.

We may not think of ourselves as great. However, the disciples did not think they were great at the time of their conversation with Jesus. We may not think that we have a great church. The disciples' church, if we can even call it a church, was not big and successful. They met in people's homes. Jesus tells us that by joyfully putting ourselves last, we will become great in the eyes of God. By letting go of our secular goals and ambitions, we will open ourselves to the spiritual dimension of life.

We also need to remember that we, as twenty-first century disciples, are Jesus' only hope. Jesus' original group of disciples did their part. Now it is time to do ours. As Jesus told Gabriel, there is no backup plan. Jesus is counting on us.

It would be a shame if, as we approached death, we suddenly realized that we had missed the point of our life. It would be a shame if we looked back on our life with a sense of despair, with the sense that we had wasted it, that we had frittered away the precious time that was entrusted to us. It would be sad if we were to realize that we had gone about this great adventure of life in the wrong way.

If we engage the moment or our death, that existential moment, with a sense of joy and serenity, I suspect it will be because we learned the secret of true greatness. I suspect it will be because we learned that the key to greatness is a life of service, and that this alone is the key to the kingdom of heaven.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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