

## **Sermon “Becoming Great”**

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**SCRIPTURE: Mark 10: 35-45**

### **The Request of James and John**

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’<sup>36</sup> And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’<sup>37</sup> And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’<sup>38</sup> But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’<sup>39</sup> They replied, ‘We are able.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;’<sup>40</sup> but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.<sup>42</sup> So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.<sup>43</sup> But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,<sup>44</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.<sup>45</sup> For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

### **SERMON “Becoming Great”**

Jesus’ disciples missed the point, again. They have a way of missing the point. This morning we hear that James and John, sons of Zebedee, have approached Jesus, asking him to do them a favor – to do whatever they ask. They asked Jesus to allow them to sit at his left and his right when he comes into his glory. They wanted to be right there with Jesus, sharing in his glory.

It seems like they just haven’t been listening to Jesus. Only a few weeks ago we read that the disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest. Jesus had sat them down and told them “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Jesus later took a child and told his friends, “Truly, I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Last week we heard about the rich man who had asked Jesus what he

needed to do to gain eternal life. Jesus had told him to sell his possessions and give them to the poor, then follow him. That man would be giving up his status in the eyes of the world. Jesus again told his disciples that the first would be last and the last would be first. Jesus' words sound like the opposite of seeking status or glory.

And in the verses immediately prior to this exchange with James and John, Jesus had spoken of his death. It was the third time he had predicted his death. He told his disciples that "the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him and after three days he will rise again." If you recall, Peter tried to argue with Jesus when Jesus predicted his own death. And Jesus had some unkind words for Peter, "Get away from me, Satan."

So Jesus had been speaking about sacrifice, service, and his approaching death. James and John have been following him. They were supposedly listening to what he was saying. And yet, they approached Jesus and asked him to grant their request, to be at Jesus' side when he comes in glory. They wanted to share in Christ's honor and glory. That's a pretty big request if you ask me.

On top of that, to quietly take Jesus aside to ask him to choose them above the other disciples does not bode well for James' and John's relationship with the other disciples. In fact, we hear that when the other disciples realized this, they were angry that the brothers asked Jesus to choose them to sit alongside Jesus. It seems as though the other disciples would have liked that honor too. Were they not listening?

Now, in the Letter to the Hebrews, we read that Jesus became a high priest but did not seek glory. High priests were put in charge of things pertaining to God on the behalf of their people. But the high priest had to deal gently with the "ignorant and wayward" because he, like all people – was weak.

The author of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is the ultimate high priest, appointed by God to be a bridge between God and the people. Jesus himself "offered up prayers and supplication with loud cries and tears" for the salvation of all before his death. Rather than seeking glory, Jesus suffered the indignity of crucifixion. Jesus did not seek glory but sacrificed himself.

So where does that leave us?

Perhaps we are like James and John, those sons of Zebedee. You might say we are sons and daughters of Zebedee. We follow Jesus, but there are times when we just don't get it. Our culture promotes individualism. It tells us that we are to be number one, to watch out for number one, to be the greatest, to promote ourselves. And it is easy to get sucked into this way of thinking.

But our faith calls us all to be priests. Maybe we don't think of ourselves as priests, but we belong to the priesthood of believers. That's how Martin Luther referred to Christians, as a priesthood of believers. So if we consider ourselves part of a priesthood then we are all priests – all of us.

If that's the case, we too are called to make sacrifices for others. And we are called to recognize our own weaknesses and the weaknesses of others, and to deal gently with one another in the midst of our weaknesses. It seems countercultural. Rather than seek glory, we need to acknowledge our weaknesses, to accept that we all have our weaknesses and be gentle about that, and to make sacrifices for one another.

Have you ever heard of Ernest Coulter?

Well his name is not a household name. He was a clerk in a NYC court in 1904 – that's 117 years ago. He had observed that more and more young boys were coming into his courtroom. He was concerned. He thought that if those boys had a caring person, if each boy had one individual who cared for them, that they might be able to stay out of trouble and out of the court system. So he found 39 volunteers, adults who were each willing to be there for one child. He started Big Brothers in NYC.

Over the years, this organization was recognized by President Theodore Roosevelt, President Calvin Coolidge, President and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Norman Rockwell. And it grew.

Around the same time that Big Brothers was formed, a group of women called Ladies of Charity started a similar program for young girls. Women befriended girls who came into New York Children's Court. The organization was eventually called Catholic Big Sisters.

In 1977 Big Brothers Association and Big Sisters merged. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America was formed. At the time, there were 357 programs.

Today, Big Brothers Big Sisters operates in all 50 states and in 12 countries around the world. The organization has been honored across political parties - by Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama. It was even recognized during the 2007 Super Bowl between the Chicago Bears and the Indianapolis Colts. The 2 coaches did a public service announcement with time donated by CBS and the NFL. They urged the 90 million viewers of that Super Bowl to support Big Brother and Big Sister and become mentors.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.bbbs.org](http://www.bbbs.org) website

I doubt you have ever heard of Sister Laura. She was a Roman Catholic Sister, small in stature with gray hair and a big heart that matched her great faith. I met her one weekend morning when I visited a hospice patient at Tabor House, a residence for men with AIDS where she was the “housemother.” It was the early 1990s, in the midst of the AIDS epidemic when 40% of our hospice homecare patients were dying of AIDS. The men at Tabor House had nowhere else to go. There was a stigma associated with having AIDS. The men were drug addicts or gay men who had no one to turn to. They had burned bridges or their families had disowned them. Some had lived on the streets. Others had lived in apartments. But those men could no longer live independently.

Sister Laura lived there too. She managed the day to day functioning of the house. She saw to it that the house was clean and neat and that the men had their meals, a safe place to sleep, and someone who cared about them. Hers was not an easy job. Imagine a handful of strangers, grown men, living together – each with their own room but sharing the dining room, kitchen and bathrooms – while dealing with a diagnosis of AIDS. She even arranged for a youth group of teens to come help with yardwork, painting, and various other chores around the house. And with a smile she graciously tolerated their high level of energy and equally loud boom boxes. She worked to maintain respect between residents and expected it of guests as well.

I still remember my first encounter with Sister Laura. It was early on a weekend morning and no one was moving on the street, except Sister Laura. She was sweeping the sidewalk. And that sidewalk had bright, colorful flowers growing alongside of it. It was the only house on the street in that inner city neighborhood with flowers. And it had the cleanest sidewalk. She took a break to direct me to my patient’s room and wish me a good morning. Then she went on with her business.

It’s been nearly 30 years since I met Sister Laura. I’m not sure why the image of that weekend morning has stayed with me all those years. Perhaps it’s because I saw this as an act of caring for this place, an act of caring for creation, a act of service to God, these men and the neighborhood. Done in humility. For me, it’s a lovely image of service to this day.

Ernest Coulter was a NYC court clerk, unknown to most people then and even now. He recognized the struggle of the boys in his neighborhood. He built a bridge between those boys and men who could be supportive of them. And that program has flourished with the support of others, of volunteers, for over 100 years.

Sister Laura was a Roman Catholic Sister, who ran a home for men with AIDS during an epidemic. She actually was influential in starting a second residence, one for women with AIDS.

She was unassuming but fervent in her actions, in her service to the sick and the vulnerable, the often abandoned grown children of God.

Jesus told the sons of Zebedee and his disciples, that “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.” Greatness is service; not notoriety, fame, or glory. I think Ernest Coulter and Sister Laura, individuals who are not familiar to most people, would not be considered great in the eyes of the world. But they exhibited greatness in their quest to serve the needs of others.

Regardless of our place in society; whether we are rich or poor, famous or unknown, young or old, we can all follow Jesus. We can all use the gifts we have received to serve others. We can all be great; not because we strive for greatness but because we can all find our own way to serve others in humility and love.