

Date: October 21, 2018

Scripture: Mark 10:35-45

Title: GREATNESS

There was a certain wild duck I heard about. This duck could fly high and far traveling hundreds of miles in glorious freedom above the landscape. But one day he landed in a barnyard. There life was less exciting but easier. He didn't have to scramble for food and when the weather was bad he could take shelter in the barn. The duck began to eat and live with the tame ducks and gradually he forgot how to fly. He became fat and lazy. But, in the spring and fall, as the wild ducks flew overhead, something stirred inside this wild duck, but he could no longer rise to join them. A poem about this duck ends with these lines: He's a pretty good duck for the shape he's in . . . But he isn't the duck that he might have been. He was no longer flying high.

John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a pamphlet titled *Maud Muller* in which he wrote, "Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been.'"

Jesus' disciples, James and John, one day asked him for a favor. They asked him to allow them to sit on his right and left hand in glory. In other words, they wanted the best seats in the house, places of honor and prestige. But they wanted to be appointed to these choice places not because they had earned them or deserved them, but because they had influence with the Boss' Son. Jesus said to James and John, "You don't know what you are asking. Are you able to drink from the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Jesus was asking, "Are you willing to give your all, as I am giving my all, to see my kingdom established?" To their credit James and John answered, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink, you will drink, and the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right or left hand is not mine to grant . . ."

It's easy for us to criticize James and John for their ambition. Their peers, the other 10 disciples, certainly made their feelings known about their request. But notice that Jesus doesn't criticize them. Their ambition doesn't seem to bother Jesus. Jesus knew that ambition can be a good thing. Jesus simply needed to refine their ambition.

Now, I want to clarify one thing. **Ambition can be destructive. Many people are driven by ambitions, that end up destroying them.**

The danger of great ambition is that you'll work so hard, you may someday wake up and find that the things you really wanted, were the things you had all along."

Many have made that discovery too late in their lives, the things they really wanted were the things they had all along. Ambition can make you or break you. Misplaced ambition can cost you your family, your health, even your faith in God. Jesus knew that. But he also knew that ambition can be a gift from God. If we let God use our ambition . . . channel it in positive ways . . . it can make our world a better place.

Think what an impoverished world this would be without those people who chose to fly higher than most of us care to fly.

Physicist Stephen Hawking died last year at age 76. Hawking was born on January 8, 1942, exactly three hundred years to the day after the death of Galileo. What an amazing life he lived. He was one of the world's best known and most productive scientists. It was he who pioneered the science of black holes. He also brought science to a mass audience with his best-selling book *A Brief History of Time*. He accomplished more than almost any scientist of his time.

The amazing thing is he did it while suffering from ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The disease gradually paralyzed Hawking over the decades. He was confined to an electric wheelchair for much of his adult life. The disease eventually robbed him of his speech. He was forced to communicate through a speech-generating device. He initially operated this device through the use of a hand-held switch. Eventually he operated the device by using a single cheek muscle.

As someone has noted, because Hawking couldn't write his intricate equations, it was necessary for him to remember them as they flashed into his mind. Diagnosed at age 21, Hawking was one of the world's longest survivors of ALS. He was an astounding man. What is it that drove him? We don't know. But we do know this: the world would be much poorer without Stephen Hawking's drive and ambition.

Jesus knew that drive and ambition are God-given, bestowed upon human beings for the betterment of humankind. Without people who are motivated to extend themselves beyond the ordinary person, there wouldn't be any great accomplishments in this world.

Michael B. Curry, Presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, tells about an old Apple computer commercial from the 1990s that went viral on YouTube. The tag line for the commercial was "Think different," a phrase that is grammatically incorrect, which is part of the point: "In the commercial, they showed a collage of photographs and film footage of people who have invented and inspired, created and sacrificed to improve the world, to make a difference. They showed Bob Dylan, Amelia Earhart, Frank Lloyd Wright, Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King Jr., Jim Henson, Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Mahatma Gandhi and on and on and on. As the images rolled by, a voice reads this poem: Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. While some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do."

Why is this important to us? **It's important because changing the world is what following Christ is all about.** Obviously James and John were ambitious for the wrong things. They wanted positions of power and prestige, whereas Jesus wanted them to be servants of the Word and the world, but at least he wouldn't have to spend his time trying to motivate them. He knew that they had an inner drive that would cause them to seek to do great things. All he needed was to point them in the right direction.

If you're going to change the world, you have to have a super-abundance of drive and ambition. Anthropologist Margaret Mead once made the well-known statement that we should "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals can change the world, indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

If you are going to set out to preach the Gospel, to the ends of the earth as Jesus called his disciples to do, you've got to be committed to flying higher than the common, contented duck, is ever going to fly.

Jesus said to James and John, "You don't know what you are asking. Are you able to drink from the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" In other words, "Are you willing to give your all, as I am giving my all, to see my kingdom established?" To their credit James and John answered, "We are able." And James and John did drink from the cup which Jesus drank. They did give their all for Christ and the kingdom.

But, they needed to understand the nature of true greatness. Notice what happens next. When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man didn't come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Did you catch what he said? "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant . . ." It's fine, Jesus is saying, if you want to be great, but understand what true greatness is. True greatness is about serving others. True greatness is about serving the community. True greatness is about serving God. True greatness is about making your church the kind of church that reaches out to people who are lonely and forgotten. True greatness is about identifying with Christ. Are you ready to fly that high or are you content to strut around in the pen with the other ducks?

There's a beautiful story about the British author Graham Greene. Greene once waited two and a half years for a 15-minute appointment with the Roman Catholic mystic Padre Pio, who resided in an Italian monastery. Padre Pio was reputed to be "a living saint" and bore on his body the "stigmata" or the wounds of Christ. On the day Greene was due to meet with this revered mystic, Greene first attended a mass where Padre Pio officiated. Their appointment was to begin immediately after the mass. When

the mass was over, instead of keeping this much awaited appointment, Greene left the church, headed for the airport and flew directly back to London. When asked why he broke the appointment he had waited on for two and a half years, Greene said, "I wasn't ready for the manner in which that man could change my life." Rev. Marek Zabriskie writes, "May I suggest that this is where many of us are. I wasn't ready for the manner in which that man could change my life.' We know we lack the love, the compassion, the humble caring that Christ embodied. We're thankful for the grace that covers this and all our sins, but we're not certain if we want to take our faith that far. We think to ourselves: 'I am not ready for the manner in which that man could change my life.'"

That man, is Jesus. He wants to make something magnificent out of your life . . . if you will let him. "Are you able to drink from the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? Are you willing to give your all, as I am giving my all, to see my kingdom established?" I hope that your heart, as well as my heart, is courageous enough to answer: Lord, we are able. Our spirits are Thine. Remold them, make us, like Thee, divine. Thy guiding radiance above us shall be a beacon to God, to love, and loyalty. With all your heart Trust, Believe, and have an active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen