



NUMBER ONE?
Mark 10:32-45

The late Henri Nouwen shares "Sitting in a plane and looking down on the broad landscapes of the rivers - the lakes - the mountains - the little villages - spread out over the earth, you wonder why it is so hard for people to live peacefully together. Astronauts have shared that the beauty of the earth from a distance - is so overwhelming - that it is hard to believe close-up we are busy destroying and killing each other."¹

As we continue in our sermon series from the gospel according to Saint Mark, we get an **up close picture** of two Jewish boys, James and John, requesting a place of power, advantage, and honor from Jesus. We would expect this of the military men of Rome's army - but not the Master's men. Surely we would not find this quest for power and position and prestige in saintly people.

We have studied on more than one occasion in Mark's gospel that Jesus was more concerned with inward character - than with external beauty. We know that in **Chapter 11 verses 15-19**, Jesus is going to deal with the cleansing of the Temple. Today's lesson deals with the cleansing of the far greater temple - the human heart - and its desires.

In **verses 32-34**, Jesus once again reminds the disciples of his upcoming suffering and death. He knows his time with the disciples is short. This is the third time that Jesus teaches them this truth. This is not a dress rehearsal. The kingdom he was building and the kind of Messiah he would be was radically different than what they presently understood it to be.

So, when James and John approach Jesus in **verses 35 and 36** with the request of privileged seats and positions in the kingdom of God - it comes as no surprise to him. As a matter of fact I think he was expecting it - and used the occasion for some classroom instruction. After all they asked the question - so school is now in session.

You and I have lived through the 1990's, and the first decade of the 21st century. Words such as No. 1, Top Dog, corporate takeovers, National Champs, success, big rich church, CEO, Bishop, and Chairman are not unknown realities and words to us.

We prefer our children to be in the upper levels of management - rather than the lower levels. We can dress up in power suits and go to power lunches. We also are concerned with our places on the organizational charts and our places at the dinner tables. Yes, we remain enamored with the pull of power and position - which is why these words of Jesus continue to be difficult to hear and obey.²

I am thankful that here in God's word - Mark does not paint the halos over the disciples yet. He deals with them, not at a safe distance, but up close and personal.

Like the disciples, our hopes, dreams, and ambitions must be cleansed, confronted, and challenged by the Christ - before they can be used for the kingdom of God. I am so glad that the biblical witness does not attempt to sanitize the disciples.

Now in all fairness to James and John, they were part of the inner circle. After all - they had seen the power that was in this Rabbi. They wanted to stay close to Jesus. The only kingdom they had seen was the impressive power of Rome and its hierarchy.

Jesus and the disciples are headed to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the city of God – a royal city where the Messiah was to claim David's throne. The disciples saw themselves entering the city with their King. However, there was no army – there was no royal procession. Jesus would be a different kind of king.

Yes, they knew Jesus would be the king - but if they could sit at his right and left - they would have it **'made in the shade.'**

Jesus did not scold them for this desire for greatness - but he must show them a different way - and introduce a different definition of greatness. In the kingdom of God servanthood and service - rather than sedition and military strategies - would produce a new world order and rule.

A greater and more excellent way would have to be modeled and prevail. As our stained glass window demonstrates, even our Lord had to pray, "Not my will, but Thine be done." Jesus does not ask us to do anything – he has not done himself.

So, when these two disciples are away from the crowds - and the other ten - they reveal more than they want to. It was good they did. Jesus did not holler at them, or condemn them - but he did teach them.

One of the greatest Methodist preachers in the 20th century was Dr. J. Wallace Hamilton of Pasadena, Florida. He preached a famous sermon called the **"Drum Major Instinct."** It has been quoted by preachers for decades. Dr. King used it many times in his preaching ministry. The question is who is the drum major? Is it Jesus Christ or yourself? Who is the leader – and who are the followers?

James and John and the other 10 disciples knew how kingdoms were established and made. One group destroyed the other. It was revolution time. When Jesus got to Jerusalem "the bad guys at the head table would be removed - their chairs fumigated and God's new crew would be seated - and their new king and the loyal members of his campaign staff would be rewarded with the good seats at either side of the king."³ They were looking for a promotion – and Jesus talks about taking a voluntary demotion. People don't take well to demotions, do we?

However, Jesus introduces a new paradigm that is going to turn the tables of their understanding upside down.

Eugene Peterson is right when he shares, "Jesus as the truth gets far more attention than Jesus as the way. It is the Jesus Way wedded to the Jesus Truth that brings about the Jesus Life."⁴ This takes a life journey to learn and live.

The disciples' methods were not really that much different from that of the Roman soldiers and government they despised. You could **not** tell any difference between one pathway to power and the others. What concerned Jesus the most was their hearts.

So Jesus in the midst of this gathering declares that greatness in his kingdom would not be defined by position, title, wealth, education or social status - but by the individual's willingness to serve and accept the role of a servant. Recently at a Strategic Planning Committee meeting our own Beth Keretzman reminded us service is not spelled **s-e-r-v-e-u-s**. The time has come that all Christian disciples see service as part of their discipleship. We are disciples of Christ. We are here to serve Christ. The world will tell you to take care of No. 1, which is you. The world will tell you it can't be done. However, it is time we stop listening to the world – and begin to read and listen to God's word.

A few years ago Quincy Jones brought a group of superstars from various musical arenas together to record a song that would help to feed hungry people. Some of the singers were Bruce Springsteen, Kenny Rogers, Diana Ross and Bob Dylan. The song was called, "**We Are The World.**" Maybe you remember it. Someone asked Quincy Jones how he got all of those superstars together in one room, to do this one song. How did he get folks who were accustomed to being the show to sing in the background, or just a line or a phrase? And he said, I put up a sign as you entered the recording studio that read, "**Have you checked your ego at the door?**"

In all honesty - there are some things we would do for the Lord that we would not volunteer to do for anyone else. We do them - not for applause or approval - but because our Lord compels us to do so. It is not based on emotions - but on obedience.

We know that in the life of the late Princess Diana - the greatest source of joy and meaning in her life - was not the Crown Jewels or titles - but serving and touching people. She especially loved children - who were in need of love and encouragement. It was only when she gave and served that she experienced her greatest fulfillment and joy. When it is not about us – we have a chance to begin to focus on the real purposes for life.

Once someone saw the late Mother Teresa washing the dirty sores on the body of a homeless man in India. The smell was awful.

As the young people would say, it was gross. The man said, "**Mother Teresa, I would not do that for a million dollars.**" She said, "Neither would I. But to demonstrate the love of my Lord Jesus Christ - I do it for nothing." Now - can you see why being born again and cleaning out our hearts and temples is so hard to do.

I want to share one of my favorite stories that comes from the pen of Dr. Howard Hendricks, retired prof at Dallas Seminary. He was flying on American Airlines to speak about servanthood at a local church. The man in the seat in front of him was a complete jerk. He was rude and irritable before he got drunk. When he was drunk - he was horrible. However, the professor was impressed by the service the flight attendant rendered this man. She was unflappable. Despite his rudeness - she was poised, courteous and gentle. A class act all the way. After the flight - he went back to her station in the plane and complimented her for such excellent work under pressure. He said to her, I am going to write a nice letter to American Airlines about your great service. She said thank you - but it's not necessary.

Then she said "I don't work for American Airlines - I work for Jesus Christ. I receive a salary from American Airlines - but I work for Jesus Christ."⁵ He said "After I picked myself up from the floor - I realized I had seen a Christian in action - and it made all the difference in the world." It still does.

There are no celebrities or prima donnas in the Christian faith - only children of God and servants of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If anyone has that exalted opinion of themselves, you will be directed to the cross. For at the cross the ground is the same level for everyone. No one has an edge or a 'foot up' in this place. There are no second-class Christians. Either we are saved by the shed blood and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ - or we are not saved at all. We are equally loved - and equally blessed.

Max Lucado, in his book entitled, **IT'S NOT ABOUT ME**, attempts to rescue us from the life we thought would make us happy. This is exactly what Jesus is teaching the disciples and us today. Max shares: "Self-promotion – self-preservation – self-centeredness. It's all about me. We relate to the advertisement that headlined, 'For the man who thinks the world revolves around him.' Yes, we have been taught to find our place in the sun. Make a name for ourselves. We thought self-celebration would make us happy. Then we learned only the God-centered life works – and it rescues us from a life that doesn't."⁶

Yes, one of the main reasons we come to church is to worship and to learn – so we can learn "to weed out all the illusions and self-deceit that our world has to offer us."⁷

Remember our opening story of the astronauts seeing how beautiful the earth looks from a distance – but so ugly close up in human affairs? Jesus had to teach and model a new way. If someone is to be No. 1 – may it be our Lord.

He who has ears – let him hear!

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
October 18, 2009 – Preached at both services
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ENDNOTES

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1. Henri J. M. Nouwen, **THE PATH OF POWER**, Crossroads Publishing Company, 1995, page 5.
 - ² Fred B. Craddock, (et. al), **PREACHING THROUGH THE CHRISTIAN YEAR, Year B**, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, Pa., First Edition, 1993, page 447.
 3. Barbara Brown Taylor, **BREAD OF ANGELS**, Crowley Publications, 1997, Boston Ma., page 43. My adaptation of it.
 - ⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE JESUS WAY**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, page 4.
 5. This story is attributed to Dr. Howard Hendericks, retired professor of Christian Education at Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas.
 - ⁶ Max Lucado, (**It's Not About Me**, Integrity Publishers, Brentwood, Tn., 2004, pages 7, 9.)
 - ⁷ Ibid, Peterson, **THE JESUS WAY**, page 53.