

“Define ‘Great’”

It happened several years ago, but the picture remains firmly etched in the minds of many. A Christian denomination’s annual meeting made the evening news on the major networks. It was not a pretty sight. Almost 2,000 people had gathered in a Midwest city for a national meeting where a doctrinal issue had created much controversy. The debate at one session turned so volatile that one man punched another. Several moments of “fisticuffs” broke out and all was recorded on tape for the nation to watch!

The sad fact was that many good things happened at that three-day meeting. But, you can guess what people remembered! The good things are long forgotten, but the picture of supposedly Christian people slugging it out on national television was indelibly stamped on the minds of countless people. One man who saw the report remarked, *“That’s why I don’t want anything to do with the church!”* It does not, however, take a major tragedy like this to bring dishonor to the church. There are countless numbers of people who have been burned by their experience in the church.

It is sometimes difficult to deal with the fact that “church people” are not perfect people. You’ve seen the bumper sticker, *“Christians are not perfect — just forgiven.”* There is a good thought in this concept, but I fear it is seen by the world as one big copout. As I read today’s Second Lesson from the book of James, I cannot imagine what James would say about that bumper sticker. Listen to his words, ***“...where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.”*** John Jewell suggests that his bumper sticker would more likely have to read something like, *“Christians aren’t perfect, but they had better be working on it!”*

Today’s Gospel turns the table on our culture’s sense of success and what it means to be a truly great person. When we hear the words, *“He’s a great man,”* or *“She’s a great woman,”* a picture of a servant does not

likely come to mind. If we describe someone as, “truly successful,” we do not usually think of someone whose goal is to become a servant to everyone! Yet, a surprising thing about Jesus and His ministry is the way He went about selecting those who would become His representatives in the world after His death. If we can understand why He chose the people He did and how He worked with them, we will go a long way toward understanding how God can use us in our world today.

Let me begin with a few notes about Capernaum. Capernaum was a small fishing village on the north end of the Sea of Galilee. It was here that Jesus set up headquarters during at least the first half of His public ministry. From here Jesus traveled far and wide while news about His teaching and healing ministry spread throughout Israel like wildfire.

Capernaum was the home of four fishermen who gave up the fishing industry to become followers of Jesus. The Capernaum road is an image of the road where you and I work and live and play. The village of Capernaum is like our towns or cities where ordinary people try to make ends meet, raise their families, and make sense out of life. Whether fishermen like Peter and Andrew, James and John or carpenters, laborers, doctors, and insurance salespersons like you and your neighbors — it is where we live that Jesus comes looking for those who will see to the completion of His work.

We are Capernaum-type disciples. As you look closely at the lives of these fisher-disciples of Jesus, you will see them portrayed with all their failures and imperfections. Mark gives us an almost embarrassing account of how these disciples shamelessly allowed their personal ambitions to stir up contention and rivalry in the ranks of Jesus’ closest associates.

For most of us, this incident would have been a very discouraging time. It had been only just before this that Simon Peter had identified Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus now for the second time tells the disciples He will be put to death. He is on the way to Jerusalem where He will be denied by Peter, betrayed by one of His disciples, and be arrested, tried and condemned to death.

Now this. Out on the Capernaum Road, just when the crisis begins to intensify, the disciples are arguing about who is the greatest. It seems unbelievable! But, think about it. The world in which we live is no less troubled than the world of Peter, James and John and the village of Capernaum. While churches squabble, cities crumble. Christians debate as societies decay. Religious parties struggle while children starve.

There is a very serious question to be asked here . . . a question that is critical in understanding Jesus' choice of followers . . . a question that is important to you and me today: *"How can Jesus Christ use such imperfect people to build a perfect kingdom?"*

Here's His plan. God made the most radical decision — the Divine Plan is that the followers of Jesus Christ, with all their weaknesses, will build the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not go to the rich or powerful or famous to gather troops for His movement. He invited this "rag-tag" crew to join Him on the Capernaum road and still chooses people like you and me to build the church and carry God's Good News to a fractured world.

There is an old legend that tells how Jesus, after His ascension, was asked by the angels how he planned to complete His mission. The angels were incredulous at His answer. *"Them?"* they exclaimed pointing to the fearful, unlearned disciples who stood lost and confused on the earth below, *"You are going to depend on them to complete your mission?"* *"That's correct,"* Jesus answers. *"And should they fail??"* the angels countered, *"If they are not capable of carrying on your work, do you have a back-up plan?"* *"They are my only plan,"* Jesus says.

There are two key issues in today's Gospel about the way Jesus intended to shape imperfect people into bearers of His good news. He chose people who were teachable. He chose people without regard of their station in life.

Jesus took His disciples aside and did some teaching about what it means to be great. Because they were teachable, He could position them to receive His words; there was hope for their transformation. The word of

Christ has the transforming power and the teachability of the disciples was the transforming premise. ***“If you want to be first, you must be last,”*** he taught them. They had argued about who would be the greatest in terms of the world’s view of greatness. In the eyes of God, however, greatness is measured by servanthood. Those who live with a “me first” attitude will come in last with God. Those who live with a “you first” attitude in the family of faith will come in first with God. Jesus would continue on from this event to His arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem. The disciples would witness the greatest “you first” in all of history.

Jesus then set a child in the midst of His followers and said that the welcoming of a little child was a welcoming of Christ himself. To welcome a child is to welcome the most vulnerable and the most insignificant. This was a great reversal of the “children should be seen and not heard” attitude of His world. In the ancient world, children were not considered potential adults — they were regarded as defective adults. Women, children, Gentiles, the sick, and the dispossessed were the insignificant, and even rejected, part of society. A male, especially a Jewish Pharisee, those were at the top of the ladder; a Gentile woman was a “dog.” Jesus turned all of this inside out and upside down. He chose the fisherman and tax collector over the priest and the scribe. He put a child first and a ruler last.

The way up with God is down! A former President made history by asking the Special Prosecutor to “define ‘is’.” Jesus makes history — and marks the path to eternity — by inviting us to redefine “Great.” And from that to understand that this is how we define what shapes our response to Him, our outlook on life, and how we will live out the Good News.

Here’s the genius of the Master’s plan. Whenever the followers of Jesus Christ would think about the fact that Jesus had chosen them — of all people — to carry on His mission, they would automatically be called back to the heart of the good news of God. *“If God can love even me, then God’s love is truly for everyone!”* Being great is not a matter of having . . . but giving. Being great is not being seen as something . . . but

in heeding the call to become nothing.

Dick Sering, founder of Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry in Cleveland, rightly expressed it: *“In the Kingdom of God, nobodies are somebodies and somebodies are called upon to become nobodies so that they can become somebodies in the Kingdom of God.”*

Being great is not having accolades . . . but in putting to use the giftedness which God provides.

Here’s the Master’s plan for us today It’s as easy as ABC.

Acceptance: Jesus Christ has accepted us for who we are (sometimes in spite of what we are) and His spirit works within us to make us who God wants us to be. Our acceptance by Christ translates into our unconditional acceptance of others.

Belief: I believe, meaning I trust that Jesus Christ knows what He is doing by choosing me for His work. I may feel insignificant or powerless to help with His mission, but the fact is that as a Christian person, I am chosen to bear the Good News to others.

Commitment: I make a commitment to choose the way of Christ instead of the way of the world when it comes to the meaning of greatness. Instead of “me first” — it is “Christ first.” Instead of “my way” it is “His way.”

The one thing that can bring authentic renewal to our life of faith and to our witness in the world is to stop and reflect seriously on that incident of the Capernaum Road. When we come to terms once again with the fact that God loves “even me” — we are in touch with the power that can change our lives; and when our lives have been changed, Christ will use us to change our world.

That is (in the words of Tony the Tiger) *“Grrrrrrrrreat!”*

Amen.