

Sermon: True Greatness

Jeremiah 11:18-20; James 3:13-4:12; Mark 9:30-37

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Maybe you sometimes feel like a small pebble lost in the immensity of the desert. But no matter how insignificant we judge ourselves to be, we can be great people for God and for others. But how?

In a sermon early in 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. said,

Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. [...] You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. . . . You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.

When Jesus' disciples quarreled about who was the greatest among them, he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

He changed the subject from who is the greatest, to the question of how to be kind to a child. And in being kind to a child, we receive Jesus Christ, yes God himself. Someone who acts kindly to a child, he or she is great in the eyes of God.

True greatness

Many people think that, in order to be great, they must be wealthy or popular or famous. Others think they must have great talent in athletics or business. Still others think in terms of political power.

But it is possible to have all these things and still not be great. And also, you can be great, even if you don't have any of these things.

In the reading from the prophet Jeremiah we hear these words about Jesus - or maybe about the prophet Jeremiah himself. He said that the people wanted to

cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!

We like to be someone, we like our name to be known. If we meet someone who says, "Hey, I have heard much about you", then we feel satisfied. Our name is known.

How to be truly great? The apostle James has a clear answer: not by being rich or famous, but by being wise. Greatness is not in what you achieve in the first place, let alone in how much you have in the bank, but in wisdom of heart and mind.

We remember people like Winston Churchill, we remember Napoleon, or Julius Caesar. But in a much more powerful way, we remember Martin Luther King, or Mahatma Gandhi, or Mother Theresa.

Their wisdom is powerful, more powerful than the life of the great captains of industry or the presidents of this world. Those presidents we remember, sure, but people like Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa are greater because their wisdom is an example for us to follow. Their wisdom is an appeal to us to behave likewise.

Is this not the sort of greatness we desire, deep down? To be seen as a truly complete human being, as someone who is a true example for others?

This shows us, by the way, that true wisdom is not the same as being able to say wise and clever words. Wisdom is not the ability to speak well.

In Jesus' days many people thought of Greek philosophers as the most wise.

Sophism was one of the important movements: they made wisdom the equivalent of being able to teach and preach in perfectly composed texts. To say something logically and beautifully was their highest wisdom. So they were the experts in great speeches.

The other very popular movement of philosophers was *Stoicism*. That was mostly focussed on how to lead a comfortable life. That was seen as the summit of wisdom. Do not care about others, but live a happy life.

St James has a very different view of true wisdom. It is the knowledge of God and the will of God, applied to daily life.

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

True greatness, wisdom, has to do with good behavior and with meekness. No, meekness is not weakness, it is an important component of the life of truly great people.

With a few broad strokes of the paintbrush, James paints for us the image of a truly great person, a wise person. What is true wisdom?

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

That is how God loves to see us. Peaceful, gentle, reasonable, merciful, full of good fruit, impartial, sincere. Such a person is nice to be with! Such a person should lead our nations! Such a person we should be for others! A humble person who does not make himself number 1 but who tries to solve the needs of others

Selfish ambition

That sort of person exists for others. And this is the key.

The opposite person is marked by 'jealousy' and selfish ambition', says James

People who only seeks their own ends are small people. James calls this behavior earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

In this regard I came across some 'wisdom' by Oprah Winfrey. She once said,

Follow your instincts. That's where true wisdom manifests itself.

I do not know the context of her words, but to me this sounds rather bad. Follow your instincts is true wisdom? I doubt it. If we follow our instincts we hit back, we kick back, we gossip back, we treat the rich and famous with high regards, we try to get more, we do not show mercy. There is nothing 'Christian' about our instinctive reactions.

James writes,

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

This is a pretty accurate description of the world we live in, and of our own societies. We are jealous, our ambitions are selfish, and that's why the world, and often our own lives as well, is such a mess of disorder and every vile practice.

The church James is writing to was also a mess. He asks them, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?"

Again, a pretty normal picture for society and sometimes also for church.

What is the cause of all these problems?

The problem is in the heart, says James. "Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?"

There is nothing wrong with passions as such. Be passionate for your God. Be passionate for your family. Be passionate for the rights of donkey's, if you like. But James is talking specifically about selfish passions.

The passions of 'I want, I want, I want'. More more more. Never being satisfied with what we have.

You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.

This means, you do not pray. But even if you pray, God does not give:

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Mind you, James talks here to a church with many poor people. Think of it, we want more and more, while the poor with their urgent needs surround us. We should be passionate for their needs, for others, not to hoard more and more into our bank accounts.

In this context a small but important fact: your church also needs your support, exactly because of the many poor in our church. Please consider what you can do - we need your regular support. Sometimes I feel we are drawing in the problems of the people. We have over 1100 Sudanese refugees in our church.

We saw in the past few weeks that James calls it blasphemy if we treat the poor worse than we treat the powerful; he calls it blasphemy if we talk bad about other people.

Now he calls it adultery and enmity with God if our passion is for more goodies, or more power, and if we are prepared to treat others badly or let others suffer in their poverty in order to get for ourselves what we want.

Let us not fool ourselves. James writes this to the church; and we are not very much better than they were, I assume. We know our own hearts. We know of ourselves what we crave for. And that is usually not described by giving away, helping, and by a sacrificial lifestyle. What we crave for is more for me and for myself.

Draw near to God

James therefore calls the Christians he writes to, to conversion. We must change our life.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. [...]
Draw near to God
Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and
purify your hearts, you double-minded.
Be wretched and mourn and weep.
Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.
Humble yourselves before God.

Yes, these are words written to a church. To Christians. To us.

We tend to live for ourselves. But God, through his servant James, tells us to turn around and live for Him and for others.

We can't deny, we all need to turn to God again and again, and ask for forgiveness. As we do each week in our time of confession. Let that not be an empty routine - but a serious moment. Because God is serious about it.

And if we humbly admit to God our difficulties to obey, then he immediately extends his gracious hands to you, to forgive and to help you:

God opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.

And there are other great promises connected to humbly serving our Lord and his people:

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.
Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

True greatness is found in humility; because God himself lifts the humble up. He makes us great in his eyes, and in the eyes of others.

Humility is the attitude of putting others and their needs in line before yourself. It is deciding not to gossip but to honor others with your words. It is the decision to treat all people, including the poor, with respect.

Humility is the attitude to treat refugees, children, hungry people, imprisoned people, with respect. And that lifts you up, because that is doing the will of God. That is wisdom. That is true greatness.

Conclusion

So what to do?

Well, first, make sure you have your priorities in life right. A life that is focused on your self only, is bound to self-destruction.

So keep your passions under control. Be passionate for what is good, not for your own gratifications and pleasures.

Make God and other people the heart of your priorities, and especially the weak, the poor, the oppressed.

And support those people. Help us as a church to care for our ever-growing community of refugees - 1100 members of our church. Use what you have for other people. Invest your money in where it is most needed.

Serving God, and serving people, that is the best life there is. People who make themselves small by always serving God and others, they are truly great as God lifts them up.

Amen.