

# Where the Least Are Greatest

Part 2 of Sermon Series: *The Upside-Down Kingdom*

a sermon based on

Mark 10:35-45

and delivered on

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22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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On March 31<sup>st</sup>, just before midnight off the coast of Newfoundland, Quartermaster of the Watch Grady noticed a light on the horizon and alerted the captain. Recognizing that the light was directly in the ship's path, the captain had the radioman send the alert:

"Please divert your course 15 degrees to avert a collision."

To which came the reply, "Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees."

Now it's the middle of the night – after midnight now – and the captain is a bit frustrated so he gets on the radio, "This is Captain Bigham of the USS Fredrick Sanford. I say again: Divert your course."

"This is Petty Officer Lamont of the Canadian Coast Guard. I say again: Divert YOUR course."

"This is an aircraft carrier of the United States Navy. We are a large warship. Divert your course at once!"

"This is a lighthouse. Your call."<sup>1</sup>

First – that's not a true story – at least in the sense that it wasn't an actual event. You may have caught on that it began "just before midnight" on March 31 and that it was after midnight by the time the story ended (i.e. April 1<sup>st</sup>). It's an old story. I embellished and made up some names: the USS Fredrick Sanford – and the "G" is for "Get outta my way!" But even though it's not a true story – a factual story – it is a "truth" story.

Even in the Gospel lesson that we just heard, James and John are a bit full of themselves: "(W)e want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." (Mk 10:35). There's a certain arrogance in making a request that way. It's almost more of a demand. "Put us in charge as your number one and number two."

Maybe it's not that farfetched. They were two of the three disciples closest to Jesus. Along with Peter, they got to experience the Transfiguration. John is "the disciple whom he loved" (Jn 19:26) – his best friend. So it's not that unreasonable, that they might have some prominence (and they would). But... Hadn't Jesus pulled a child from the crowd as the argued among themselves (on the way to Capernaum) who would be greatest, and then told them that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all"? (Mk 19:33-37).

Maybe they were put up to it. In Matthew's account, it's their mother who does the asking. (Mt 20:20:21) I don't know why Mark and Matthew chose to tell it the ways they did. It's not a contradiction. It's one of those things in language and how things are expressed. But I can't help but wonder why the difference. Was Matthew's account trying to give James and John a break – saying that their mother pushed them into the situation? Or was Matthew dissing them a little bit by saying, "Their mommy came and asked..." Was Mark trying to spare them that scandal? Either way this was a scandal. Both Gospels tell us that "When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John." (Mk 10:41, Mt 20:24). Neither tells us why. Was it because they got to Jesus to ask first? Were the others jealous? or merely embarrassed that these two still didn't get it?

If we pay attention, we'll notice that Jesus did not tell them that they wouldn't get to sit one at his right and the other at his left. He only said that that has already been decided by the Father. (Mk 10:40) He does, however, point out that they are looking at things the wrong way. They've got it upside-down.

"You know how it is among the Gentiles. Those in charge domineer those under them. (Mk 10:41, Mt. 20:25) That's not what I want from you. The kingdom of God doesn't trickle down. As the psalmist says, the Father makes springs gush forth in valleys (Ps 104:10) and faithfulness (is to) spring up from the ground, and righteousness will down from the sky (Ps: 85:11). A wise man builds a strong foundation, and digs deep so that what follows will endure. (Lk :6:48)"

Consider Herod. He didn't want to behead John the Baptist, but because he didn't want to embarrass himself he gave the order. Kings always have someone out to knock them off their high place – so they spend all their time trying to keep power. We see that during campaign season. Don't we?

Then Jesus turns it around and says, if you want to be great be a slave – not just to serve because you want to do something nice, but because you feel compelled to tend to the needs of all. To that end take on the roles and responsibilities to which you are called and gifted and talented because to whatever the task or purpose or roll God calls us – it's important – even as if we think we could do better – or our mothers (like James and John) think we could.

During World War II, England need more coal. So, Winston Churchill called together the labor leaders to get their help. As he finished talking to them he asked them to imagine a parade in Piccadilly Circus after the war. First, he says, would come the sailors who kept the sea lanes open, followed by the soldiers who had come home from Dunkirk. Then the pilots who had battled the Luftwaffe and driven them from the skies.

Finally, would come a line of sweaty, dirty men in miner's caps. Then when with the impudent voice of arrogance, a cry would come from the crowd, "And where were you during the critical days of our struggle?" ten thousand voice would resound, "We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal."<sup>2</sup>

Without coal the ships would have remained in dock. Without coal the soldiers would have frozen, without coal the factories couldn't have produced airplanes for the pilots to fly.

As Prime Minister, Churchill saw that his job wasn't to tell people what to do so that he could be important, but that as a leader – a ruler – his job was to serve – to serve the people of the UK – to serve those miners by helping them to claim the honor of what they had to offer.

This is how Jesus turns things upside-down. He doesn't disparage the role of leaders. He's not insisting that everyone has to set up tables or take down chairs in the church hall. Instead he's inviting the disciples and us to see that whatever task we do – in whatever role we serve – that when it is for the purpose of building up one another – that it is to God's glory. It's even okay to be in charge – like the conductor who directs the symphony knowing that each person in their seat is better than he at the task before them, his success is in bringing the best forth from them so that they and the music shines.

That is what Jesus offers us. He even tells the disciples once again that he has come to serve. That doesn't mean he never let anyone serve him, but that everything that he did was for our sake, even his death would be a ransom (the Greek word here, *λυτρον* {*lytron*} means an effective act – not necessarily a payment) – his death would be a ransom a service for our glory.

To be the greatest in the kingdom is to live for one another in whatever task or role that is. That doesn't mean that any one of us should necessarily avoid being in charge as long as we recognize that the charge is to help others shine in their work.

And it goes beyond church. When you go to work tomorrow – whether it be paid or volunteer – when gather with friends for coffee – or whatever you do, look for a way to "serve" everyone you meet, even if that means directing them into excellence – but always with a spirit that others may shine, as Christ has made it possible for you to shine as well. AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.as:p?item\\_topic\\_id=1372](http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.as:p?item_topic_id=1372)

<sup>2</sup> Don McCullough, *Waking from the American Dream* found in Craig Brian Larson, *Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Baker Books, 1993) 222.