

"The Truly Great Among Us"
Matthew 23:1-12

Few words are as overused as the term great. Think of how many times you have heard this word over just the past few days. During the World Series and the college football games of the week, we heard numerous references to great athletes. Almost every candidate for political office has been called by some admirer a great public servant or a great American. In articles I read last week, I saw the word great used to describe a scientist, an actor, and a minister.

To call someone great is to set that person apart. The great are to be praised and honored. The word, when used to describe someone, is not always specific. But it gets our attention. It tells us that that person is special in some way.

Jesus also used the term great. He did not use it often, so we need to take careful note when it appears in his statements. Jesus did not refer to military generals, Roman leaders, or even religious authorities as great. He did not even set up a hierarchy among his followers. Jesus said to pay attention to the great ones among us. But look at who they are. The truly great among us are not those who excel at some endeavor or succeed in our rough-and-tumble world. The truly great among us are those who have chosen to serve others.

Jesus gave his disciples this much needed lesson during his last week. It was a message that they simply had to absorb. It wouldn't hurt us to get back to it. We too readily buy into the values of the world and adopt the mindset fed to us by the media. Even the church is drawn to the big and to the successful. We seldom call attention to the mundane.

Jesus directed his disciples and the persons in the crowd standing by to the places of honor occupied by the "scribes and the Pharisees." They sat, he said, in "Moses' seat," a place of authority and esteem. They wore their "phylacteries broad and

their fringes long” to show off their religiosity; they being addressed as “rabbi” which meant “my great one.” Beware of the so-called great ones, Jesus said, for they do not always practice what they preach, they did not should the burden that they eagerly place on others, and they act primarily for the show.

To make certain that the disciples did not miss the lesson, Jesus became very direct. “You,” he said, “are not to be called rabbi; you are not to be called Father; you are not to be called instructors.” The truly great, Jesus concluded, are those who quietly serve. To make the point clear he added, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This idea still goes against the grain. Exalting the humble is not something we are conditioned to do. Think for a moment, though, about your own experience. How many times has your life been touched and blessed by some great person in our society? How many times has it been impacted by some simple act of caring shown toward you by someone who had nothing to gain? How many kind words or practical expressions of help have come from those who would never think they were doing anything noteworthy?

Because our society has the attitude that “it is more blessed to receive than to give,” and that being served is too preferred to serving, humble service is a choice we have to make. Everyone has heroes, persons who fire our imaginations and influence our thinking. One of my heroes is the twentieth century missionary/doctor/scholar/musician Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer made his mark in several fields, but what continues to touch me whine I read about him was is deep humility.

One of the most poignant stories I have ever read had to do with Schweitzer’s search for a place to serve. He had earned doctorates in music and religious, but his mission board did not approve of his theological ideas, so he got a medial degree in

order to go to Africa to serve in missions. He was forbidden to preach. That ban was lifted when his obsession for service became so obvious.

In his jungle hospital, Schweitzer received a letter from a graduating class of nurses asking for a class motto. This is what he wrote in response: "You ask me to give you a motto. Here it is: Service. Let this word accompany each of you throughout your life. Let it be before you as you seek your way and your duty in the world. May it be recalled to your minds if ever you are tempted to forget it or to set it aside. It will not always be comfortable companion, but it will always be a faithful one. And it will lead you to happiness, no matter what the experience of your lives are. Never have this word on your lips, but keep in your hearts. And may it be a confidant that will teach you not only to do good, but to do it simply and humbly."

I have books on my shelf about great Christian leaders and great preachers though the centuries. When I trace the movements of the faith and the directions Christianity has taken, I feel that the deepest influences have come for persons such as Schweitzer, Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, George Fox, and John Wesley. The power of our faith comes not from the decisions and pronouncements of ecclesiastical powers, but from the simple service of followers of Christ.

I grew up thinking that people paid attention to what the church was doing. When I went to seminary, I thought everyone was concerned about what was being taught in the classroom. When I attended denominational meetings, I thought the world stopped to follow our deliberations. I learned later that only church people, and not too many of them, really care about what the church is doing. We can decide and declare and blow our horns all we wish, and not many persons will take heed. But initiate some ministry, not for publicity, but out of a basic desire to bless other lives; and the church becomes the people of God. Christ is seen in us. And that is a great thing!

Several years ago in a mission in the slums of New York, a man named Joe; called by everyone on the street a hopeless, dirty wino, became a Christian. His conversion was a genuine transformation. Joe became the most compassionate person

in the mission. He spent his days and nights there doing whatever needed to be done. No task was beneath him. He cleaned up vomit left by violently sick alcoholic men who came through. He cleaned bathrooms. Joe did what was asked of him with a sincere smile and with a seeming gratitude for a chance to help. He helped feed feeble men who came in off the street. He assisted with getting everybody a bed for the night.

One evening, the director of the mission was delivering the required evangelistic message to the usual crowd of bored and sullen men, when one of them got up, came to the altar, and knelt to pray. He cried out to God to come into his life and help him to change. The repentant man kept shouting "Oh God! Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe!" The director of the mission leaned over and said to the man, "Son, I think it would be better if you prayed, 'Make me like Jesus!'" The man looked up at the director with a quizzical expression on his face and asked, "Is he like Joe?"

Somehow I think Jesus would be pleased with that kind of questions. Jesus, according to Paul, "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death --- even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

The truly great walk and live among us. They are the humble servants who point the way to the Christ.

J. William Harris

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