

March 18, 2018  
Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Aspiring to His Greatness”

Mark 10:35-45

We rightly think of Almighty God as above and beyond us and of course that is correct. He is the Creator. We are but His Creation. Holy Scripture, especially the Psalms, makes proclamations like, *“The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed; he has put on strength as his belt... Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty!”* That is most certainly God, not us. We rightly hold God as incomprehensibly our superior. He is, well, God. In preaching and teaching I often quote one of my seminary professors, Joel Okamoto, “God is God, we are not.”

Lots of Christians give something up during Lent and if you ask them about it, they’ll say something like, “It’s a small thing I do to remind me of Christ’s sacrifice and spur me to devotion and meditation on God’s goodness.” Some of the thinking behind that is that God is so great, and what He has done in Christ for us is so awesome, that nothing of us can compare, can come close to our awesome loving God.

I’m certainly not going to argue with that. But in light of today’s Gospel lesson, I might say that there is another duality of the Christian life in play. In another way of thinking, God may not be as far removed from you as you thought.

It all starts out with the disciples doing what human beings do—compete with one another. They all want to be first, to be the more powerful, the more high up, the top dog. James and John are brash enough to try and get Jesus to promise to do what they ask before they even ask it—to sit on either side of Jesus in His glory. Never mind that they don’t know what they’re asking—I mean Jesus has already told them three times that He is on His way to die in Jerusalem. We know what they’re thinking. They’re thinking there is some earthly glory, power and majesty in the offing and they want to be sure to get more than their fair share.

When the rest of the disciples hear about it, they’re indignant. Why? My guess is because they didn’t think of it first, and they didn’t want to get hoodwinked out of their portion of the power, glory and majesty. Everybody knows it’s a dog-eat-dog world and it’s better to be the top dog, or at least as close to the top as you can get. And all these guys are aspiring to that spot.

Jesus says sure, that’s the way of the world. But it’s not the way of His kingdom.

*“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

What Jesus is saying is nothing less than greatest commandments that He will specify a couple chapters later: love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. This means lovingly serving God and neighbor. But here Jesus frames it as aspiring to be great in His kingdom. In this aspiring to be great He gives Himself as an example. *“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

So here I’d like us to pause and think about how we aspire to be great in the world. If someone aspires to be a great football quarterback, do they try to emulate anyone? Drew Brees maybe? If you aspire to be a great scientist, do you look to examples like Einstein, Curie, or the

recently passed Stephen Hawking? Architect, teacher, accountant, theologian, chef, bricklayer, oilfield worker, politician, nurse, homemaker, whatever...you know somebody who did the job well and you aspire to that quality and character.

In this manner God is not above, beyond and far off. He has come close in our flesh as the human example to which we aspire. It's important we see Him this way. For if we view Jesus only as the God far off, drawing close to Him is nothing but a pipe dream.

But listen of Christ in our epistle lesson, *"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death..."* Does that sound like God far off, or like you and I in our desperate need? Earlier in this same epistle it is may clear that, *"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*

We do not be mournful and lackadaisical thinking all we can ever be is poor, miserable sinner. We aspire to greatness in the kingdom as a loving servant of God and neighbor! We aspire to serve, love and live as the human being Jesus Christ!

And I can almost read your minds thinking, "But Jesus is perfect! Jesus is God! Nobody can be the human being that Jesus was!"

Wrong! That's a cop-out! And I've got two good points why that is a total cop-out.

First, St. Paul in the middle of First Corinthians spends a good bit of time urging Christians toward exactly this point and says specifically this: *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."* Does this sound like the excuse of "But that's just too hard for a poor, miserable sinner like me" is going to fly? No. This is an exhortation aspire to be as the human being Jesus Christ—do not give in to temptation.

And the second reason why you can't say "But Jesus is perfect! Jesus is God! Nobody can be the human being that Jesus was!" is even more compelling. That reason is the very Gospel of Jesus Christ itself!

What is the Gospel? It is the good news that Jesus Christ died with your sins, rose again to perfect and eternal life and now through the means of grace—the Word, the Baptism, the Supper—gives you His righteousness as a gift. You wear Jesus! You are in Jesus!

The reason you can aspire to live Christ's perfection is that in Christ, you've already been made perfect. You stand in Christ and thus this day are a saint, unsullied by this world's sin. You can aspire to be Christ because by grace, Christ is your present reality.

So by no means do you, me or any Christian get lazy and think battling temptation and sin is too hard, so why even try any more. In Christ we've won the war! The repentance to which we are called is striving to live that reality which is turning from sin, being forgiven, and aspiring to the very human life of Christ Himself. You can do this, because that life is the life He gives you.

Yes, God is far above and beyond you. But in Christ He is also abiding inside you. He daily gifts you the ability to be great in the kingdom as He has in His own humanity, not to be served but to serve, serve both God and neighbor unto life everlasting. The Gospel makes this true. The Gospel is God far off and also in your skin.

Amen.