

Humble Service

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, October 18, 2009)

Isaiah 53:4-12 (TEV)

- ⁴ “But he endured the suffering that should have been ours, the pain that we should have borne. All the while we thought that his suffering was punishment sent by God.
- ⁵ But because of our sins he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did. We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received.
- ⁶ All of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way. But the LORD made the punishment fall on him, the punishment all of us deserved.
- ⁷ “He was treated harshly, but endured it humbly; he never said a word. Like a lamb about to be slaughtered, like a sheep about to be sheared, he never said a word.
- ⁸ He was arrested and sentenced and led off to die, and no one cared about his fate. He was put to death for the sins of our people.
- ⁹ He was placed in a grave with those who are evil, he was buried with the rich, even though he had never committed a crime or ever told a lie.”
- ¹⁰The LORD says, “It was my will that he should suffer; his death was a sacrifice to bring forgiveness. And so he will see his descendants; he will live a long life, and through him my purpose will succeed.
- ¹¹ After a life of suffering, he will again have joy; he will know that he did not suffer in vain. My devoted servant, with whom I am pleased, Will bear the punishment of many and for his sake I will forgive them.
- ¹² And so I will give him a place of honor, a place among the great and powerful. He willingly gave his life and shared the fate of evil men. He took the place of many sinners and prayed that they might be forgiven.”

Mark 10:35-45 (TEV) ³⁵Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus. “Teacher,” they said, “there is something we want you to do for us.”

³⁶“What is it?” Jesus asked them.

³⁷They answered, “When you sit on your throne in your glorious Kingdom, we want you to let us sit with you, one at your right and one at your left.”

³⁸Jesus said to them, “You don’t know what you are asking for. Can you drink the cup of suffering that I must drink? Can you be baptized in the way I must be baptized?”

³⁹“We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink the cup I must drink and be baptized in the way I must be baptized. ⁴⁰But I do not have the right to choose who will sit at my right and my left. It is God who will give these places to those for whom he has prepared them.”

⁴¹When the other ten disciples heard about it, they became angry with James and John. ⁴²So Jesus called them all together to him and said, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. ⁴³This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; ⁴⁴and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people.”

Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu was born August 26, 1910, in Macedonia. Her father was a successful businessman and Agnes lived a comfortable life as a child, even though she was a Christian living in a predominately Muslim country. Her father died when she was 9, and she was raised by her mother, a deeply religious woman. Agnes' mother and sisters faithfully attended church daily and prayed regularly. At age 12, Agnes began to feel the call to serve God. When she approached her priest, he told her she would know it was a call from God if she felt really happy by the idea that God was calling her to serve him. It seems that her priest understood Jesus' teaching about service. At age 18, after assisting at

several religious retreats, she knew God was calling her to special Christian Service. On Assumption Day, 1928, Agnes left her home to join the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto, who were very active in India. There she adopted the name of Teresa. She eventually came to Calcutta, where she lived among and served the poorest of the poor. In the course of time the church elevated her to a leadership position, where she became known as Mother Teresa. Although this was an honor, her leadership position was one of humble service, and in fact, her very name is now synonymous with humility and service.

James and John evidently were not on this same path. They wanted honor and glory. From verse 38 and 39 we can see that they brought high commitment. In answer to Jesus' question, they said they were ready for whatever trials and troubles came along. But they didn't really know what they were asking for. Notice that Jesus didn't criticize them. In fact, you almost get the impression that he commended them for their courage and commitment. But Jesus plainly told them that their request for honor was not a gift he could give. Jesus said it would only be a gift from God. Furthermore, this gift from God would be a reward, not for bravery, not even for commitment and tenacity, but for humble service. In Jesus' words, "If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all."

Jesus himself was the model for humble service. He was obedient to God's will. He mingled with the poor, the sinners, the sick, and he brought them a blessing, sometimes in the form of food, sometimes as forgiveness, sometimes as healing. In fact, as you listened to the prophecy from Isaiah, couldn't you almost see Jesus in those words? **He was wounded for our transgressions, carried our diseases, oppressed, afflicted, he poured himself out to death, to overcome death, to give us hope and lead us to eternal life.**

In our society, and in fact in most societies, greatness has to do with power, with the ability to make other people do what the great person wants them to do. Greatness may have to do with conquest, as with Alexander the Great, or Peter the Great. Try to remember your history lessons – all the people called "the Great" were famous conquerors. Even in our day, greatness seems to be attached to fame or fortune, or political success. We just can't imagine humility leading to greatness.

Oh, we have our puns that teach otherwise, such as: "The bigger the man's head, the easier it is to fill his shoes." And even some very thoughtful quotes, for example, this one from John Ruskin, "I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility." But the truth is that we have so many in our culture who exhibit the opposite of humility, that we have begun to look down on those who are truly humble. I think Muhammad Ali is a classical example. I can still hear him crowing on National TV, "I am the greatest." There was no humility evident in that man. In fact, a story is told about a time when he was about to take off on an airplane flight, the stewardess reminded him to fasten his seat belt. He responded in typical Muhammad Ali fashion, "Superman don't need no seat belt." The stewardess had a great come back: "Superman don't need no airplane, either. You fasten your seatbelt."

Just like Muhammad Ali, we all have our moments when we need to be knocked down a peg or two. We need to be given a chance to reclaim some humility. Ministers like to tell stories about one another that illustrate this. For example, there is a story about a minister who was asked to speak for a certain charitable organization. After the meeting the program chairman handed the pastor a check. Oh, I couldn't take this," the pastor said with some embarrassment. "I just appreciate the honor of being asked to be your speaker. You have better uses for this money. You apply it to one of those uses." The program chairman asked, "Well, do you mind if we put it into our Special Fund?" The pastor replied, "Of course not. What is the special fund for?" The chairman answered, "It's so we can get a better speaker next year."

Every now and then we need one among us who becomes great because of service, one like Mother Teresa, just to prove it is possible, just to show us that Jesus was right, the greatest among us must be the servant. So aspire to greatness. Not a greatness achieved by becoming a boss and making other people do what you tell them. Not even greatness achieved by using your connections and negotiating, like James and John tried to do. But greatness achieved through humble service, through helping others. And you will find, through such service, God will indeed reward you greatly. Amen.