

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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Isaiah 53: 8-12, Mark 10:35-45
Firsts and Lasts

The scripture we heard from Isaiah today is often read on Good Friday. It is a portion of scripture referred to as the “suffering servant.” Many pastors portray it as a prophecy foretelling the coming of Jesus as Messiah. They emphasize the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus to atone for the sins of the world; the suffering servant, God’s plan for human salvation.

But in the context of the book of Isaiah, it is the words of three or more prophets to the Israelites before, during, and after the Babylonian exile. They warned of the coming exile of the people, advocated faithfulness during the exile, and foretold the Babylonian empire collapse and return to Jerusalem. They speak of both a person and a people who are both rebellious and faithful. The reference to a suffering servant may have been one person- a representative of the Israelites. The suffering servant could also be the nation. A whole group of people called to be servants faithful to God. In spite of suffering, they are to rely on God and remain faithful. God will provide resources and capabilities. Then they are to set an example that will draw others to God.

They were the chosen people- not because they were special, great, or powerful. Their stories show how human and normal they were. Instead it is God

who is special, God gives them the resources and capabilities. God empowers Moses to lead the exodus, raises the shepherd boy David into a King, and sends the Persian Cyrus to defeat Babylon and end the exile.

No, there wasn't anything "special" about the people. They became special because they God chose them. Their task is then to live out their status as chosen through faithfulness to God, to be a light that then draws other people to God. They are not to seek greatness, or compete for the world's riches, or become the best or the first. They are just to use the resources and capabilities God has given them and be faithful to their relationship to God.

But as human beings we don't seem to be able to do that. We seem to hunger for power and greatness. James and John seem to show that when they ask Jesus to sit at his right and left hand when he takes possession of his throne. And the other disciples get angry about that- perhaps because they see how inappropriate James and John have been, or perhaps because they think Jesus might have granted it to them if they had just asked first. Jesus has just finished telling the disciples about his death and resurrection for the third time. And again he has to remind them in his kingdom the first shall become last and the last shall become first.

Some people are so eager to become first, they lose track of their goal and they will do anything. There is a story about Richard Petty the race car driver that

illustrates this. Going into the last lap, he was a whole 30 seconds behind the two lead cars. An eternity in racing and it looked like Petty's 45 race losing streak would turn into #46. But then the car in second place tried to pass the #1 car on the final stretch. This caused the #1 car to go slightly out of control and lose his lead. He got so mad that he caught up with the new leader and forced him into the outside wall. Both vehicles came to a screeching halt. The two drivers jumped out and quickly got into a slugging match. In the meantime, third-place Petty cruised by for the win. The two drivers lost their cool, lost their places, lost focus on their goal, and in front of a hundred thousand fans, embarrassed the heck out of themselves. It was sure good for Petty though.

Although we might not all want to be first, there is no doubt that all of us want to have a good reputation. I have heard it said that our reputation has 3 parts: Identity, Image and Personality. Our identity is what we say about ourselves and how we present ourselves. The drivers presented themselves as fabulous professionals, able to handle high speeds and stress. Our image is what others think, how they perceive us. The two fist fighting drivers blew those two! Our personality is the real truth of who we are. Petty stayed true to his identity and image as a cool professional and a great sportsman and perhaps that is his true personality. The goal for our lives is to get all three of those identity, image, and personality, in sync.

You see being first, or being great is a concept that depends upon our perspectives and biases. Whether someone or something is great or not depends on our subjective judgements of what we value. In the movie, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, Richard Gere played Zack Mayo, a man focused on his own needs, his own aspirations. He had no use for other people, except as they served his purposes. But near the end of the movie, in an obstacle course race he stops to help a fellow officer candidate. He could have ignored her. Everyone was cheering for him, even her. He was only off the all time record by 2 hundredths of a second. He could have finished the obstacle course and gotten his name in the record book. But he would have achieved “eternal greatness” for something now understood was something without any real value. His perspective of what being first and being great meant changed over the course of the movie, until being part of a group, being respected by his peers, helping others to attain their goals became a part of his character.

When used in their penultimate purpose, art and movies, call us to question what is real, what is of value. If the people we see portrayed are real to us we see them living their lives in joy and suffering. In their stories they often overcome great obstacles, and are called on to question and act and on their true values, to seek the true meaning of greatness.

Throughout history God has sent prophets, in memory of whom religions have been founded. They present examples of how we are to focus our lives, determine our values, make meaning out of our existence and develop a relationship with God. They inevitably met challenges, obstacles, questions, and persecution. They suffered as servants for their message; Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Buddha. In addition to the trials of body, they suffered loneliness because no one could truly understand them or sympathize with their minds. Their only solace was their single-minded devotion to God or their conviction about the truth which they, alone in the world, could understand. They lived for others, giving their lives and substance to save them. They manifested divine compassion, selfless love, self-sacrifice and put themselves at risk in order to overcome ignorance and enmity.¹

These were truly great people. People who endured as suffering servants. They could have been first, but became last to serve the least. But they are very hard examples to follow. It is hard not to feel intimidated and even shamed by their examples, even scared. How many of us would choose to give up everything, family, friends, homes, jobs, all that we are to become great as they were- and live our lives as suffering servants?! But we are normal human beings, not Jesus,

¹ <http://origin.org/ucs/ws/theme085.cfm>, United Communities of Spirit, World Scripture- a comparative anthology of sacred texts, Rejected by the World and The Man for Others

Mohammed, or Buddha, and we not called to be great in the ways they were and are.

Instead, we are called to be great through the optimal use of our resources and capabilities. That says so much in so few words it really bears thinking about. Greatness is the optimal use of your resources and capabilities. In our lives as normal human beings it is important that we find ways of taking the values of the great ones and translating them into our every day lives. And we need to find people and examples that describe and portray, what first and last and great means, in the world we live in.

I found one the other day in the business world. The economic woes, and scandals of abuse of power, money and people have required ethical people in business to speak up to promote good values. One of the ways they are doing this is talking about value of the triple bottom line. While greatness and firsts have been defined in the past by the bottom line: profit. This is now being superceded by the value of the triple bottom line: people, planet, and profit.

To be first or to be great does not only mean being the fastest runner, the best driver, or the most profitable businessperson. It also does not only mean being a prophet, suffering servant, or great leader for whom religions are founded or wars are fought. To be great means to use what you have, your intelligence, your personality, your body, your mind, your possessions, all your resources to be

the best you can be -- and to carry out that greatness daily in business and in life. To be able to do that in the world we have here and now, and to continually grow and improve throughout your life, adjusting as the world changes around you.

At the age of 82, Patrick has found there are things he can no longer do. But that has not slowed him down. Instead he has developed his ability to mentor and the skill of “spotlighting” people. Where ever he goes, he greets people heartily, stops to compliment them on something, and makes sure they know how great they are. He recognizes and encourages them to use their resources and capabilities! He practices greatness- by bringing out greatness in others.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are the chosen people- not because we are great, or powerful. We know from our own personal stories how human and normal we are. It is God who is great. It is the love of God that empowers us, the love of God that raises us, and the love of God that sends us. That is where true greatness comes from. We do not need to seek greatness, or compete for the world’s riches, or become the best or the first, and we never need fear being last. We have a God who loves us, every minute of our lives, for who we are.

We only need to make optimal use of the resources and capabilities and love that God has given us. In doing so, we will be faithful to our relationship to God. Individually and as a group of people, our example will then call others to God. That then will be true greatness. Amen.