

18 October 2015 (21st Sunday After Pentecost/29th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Delusions of Grandeur”
Mark 10:35-45

When I was in eighth grade, I auditioned for our school’s Spring production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta, *The Mikado*. I had studied music since I was six, and I sang in the chorus, and I really thought I would be selected to play the lead role of Yum-Yum. But I wasn’t. Of course, my parents had been supportive and said that they were sure I’d get the part. Some of my friends thought so, too. My music teachers thought otherwise. I did get the part of one of the other little maids, but it was a lesser role. I resented the girl who got the lead, and secretly gloated every time she missed a cue or sang off key. But as the rehearsals went on, I got over it and actually had a wonderful time learning the dialogue and the music. The experience started me on a life long love affair with Gilbert and Sullivan’s operettas, which I used to listen to by the hour. And when the production was over, we all hugged and kissed and told each other how great we were. Over time there would be many more productions and concerts, auditions and try-outs. Some of them have gone well and some have gone better than others—and I’ve learned that it’s all good. But, for the record, I would have been great as the lead in that eighth grade production of *The Mikado*. As they say in the world of sports, “We wuz robbed!”

It is a fact of the way we are wired that we aspire to greatness, however we define greatness. We have ambitions, we have dreams, we imagine ourselves on stage or in an important job or in charge of a big production. It may not be President of the United States, but whether the ambition is far above where we are or just a little above where we are, our minds and our wills stay busy projecting us above and beyond our present circumstances. We imagine living in a different place and we can even walk through the rooms of a house yet to be built, or drive a car yet to be purchased. God created our spirits big, and gave us free will to match. We are hardheaded and stubborn, and that is exactly how God wants us, for when we freely decide to follow God’s lead and let God be in charge of our lives, we are unstoppable. But we are also hardhearted. And when we fall in love with ourselves to the exclusion of all others, including God, we run roughshod over others in our obsession with self-grandeur. We become so convinced of our own greatness, we refuse to accept a different outcome from what we have imagined.

And yet, is this really true of all of us? When the Bible talks about sin and selfishness, does it mean that everyone is obsessed with his or her own greatness? I know people who are very quiet about their accomplishments and aspirations. They shy away from the soapbox and seem terribly humble and self-effacing, reluctant to be in the spotlight, unwilling to wield any kind of visible power. But look below the radar, and you see how they look for ways to get their way as they manipulate other people with threats or favors. Whether from formal positions of power or from behind the scenes, all human beings suffer from the same root sin: we are all obsessed with our own greatness, with our right to our own way, and we suffer from delusions of grandeur. As creatures of spirit and will, we do not defer gracefully to others, nor do we take naturally to humility.

That is why, from the perspective of the Gospels, we must be reborn, and must receive the mind of Christ in order to be set right in relationship to God and to other people.

Today's reading from Mark's Gospel, in describing the ambitious request of James and John, also describes each of us. In James and John we see ourselves and our Hollywood dreams, our visions of future glory. But what makes James' and John's request especially off key is that they present it to Jesus right after he has talked about his suffering and death for the third time, and so it makes them appear especially insensitive as well as presumptuous. It is hard to tell whether James and John don't know how to respond to Jesus' fate, or whether they don't care—either way, they completely bypass him and his desire to share his life with them, so that they can secure some kind of assurance that wherever he ends up, they will enjoy an exalted position. James and John are so obsessed with their own greatness and importance, they cannot even see Jesus except as a means to an end. And when Jesus asks them whether they are able to drink the cup he drinks or to be baptized with his baptism, they reply all too quickly, "Of course." But of course, they don't understand what Jesus is really talking about, and when Jesus pulls them back to face what he has been trying to explain about himself all along, the other ten disciples become angry with James and John for asserting themselves in this very self-aggrandizing way.

What I marvel at in this text is how Jesus is direct with the disciples without rejecting them. We know that the first time Jesus addressed his fate—that he would be betrayed and would suffer and die and rise again, Peter intervened in a misguided attempt to pull him back from the brink, and Jesus strongly rebuked him as though he were addressing Satan. This time, though, Jesus perceives a different kind of teachable moment, and he uses the anger that has raised its ugly head among the disciples to point out how destructive self-promotion is. To follow Jesus as one of his disciples is to become a servant and slave of others, to take one's ego and set it on the shelf, to defer self-grandeur as the primary goal of one's life. To follow Jesus is to become like him, not like those who exercise self-aggrandizing power. And that is one of the most counterintuitive lessons we stand to learn as we journey with Jesus.

Given our universal human struggle with the need to be great, we in the church must realize the devastating effect of self-promotion on the community's life together. Nothing destroys mutual trust and spiritual growth more effectively than just one person who insists on getting his or her way, or on being in charge. Because Jesus calls us to model a different way of being and leading than the way of the world, we are to defer to each other as we seek the will of God. Now, that doesn't mean that we can't express a personal opinion or have a strong conviction about an issue. But when it comes time to make a decision, our life together comes apart if I suddenly decide to promote myself and my interests. To defer to each other so that Christ can shine forth is the true mark of a community's faithfulness to the Gospel.

When my husband and I first moved to Norfolk, Virginia after receiving orders there on active duty, I remember attending my first Presbytery meeting in that area. It didn't take long to notice that there was one minister who could always be counted on to

speaking. That happens in Presbytery meetings—there are always those who have to comment on everything. But this minister was almost always negative, accusatory, and in some way, self-promoting. It was as though he had to have a hand in everything, to leave his mark on every decision that Presbytery made, or to dig in and oppose a decision he didn't agree with. At first I regarded his comments with kind of a "here we go again" attitude every time he stood to be recognized. But there was one meeting in particular when he went too far and personally accused another minister of misconduct, on the floor of Presbytery. After that, the body turned against him, and became more wary and edgy in its life together, as though people didn't know when he might speak next, or what he might say. I never understood why he felt compelled to continually assert power, but I witnessed firsthand how damaging it was to that community, how it undermined trust, and how it hurt people. I remember longing for God's voice from the whirlwind to speak to this minister the way God spoke to Job after all the windy speeches of his friends. As God's voice recalibrated Job's life, communities that seek the will of God must be guided by the same powerful voice that can speak above all others. That is the only way God's people can come together in mutual deference and service. And sometimes we have to stop and call upon that voice to speak to us when self-promotion or selfish ambition infects the body.

I do believe that communities, like people, react badly and selfishly when they feel threatened—and that anxiety may well account for why James and John suddenly asserted their ambition and ran right over Jesus' baring of his soul. But the answer to selfish ambition, the only way to pull delusions of grandeur back to reality, is with extraordinary humility, as Jesus demonstrated and calls us to demonstrate in our relationships. This church's life together is a treasure too precious not to cultivate in a spirit of humility and grace, but it can be threatened by the normal anxiety that sets in during an interim period when everyone wants to know what lies around the corner and when we will get there. I would urge you to consider, however, that all of the times of our life are interim, between one thing and another, and fraught with uncertainty. Do we ever know what lies around the corner? Regardless of the circumstances, our sin and our vulnerability before God remain the same: we are prone to delusions of grandeur that get worse when we become anxious and afraid. But as predictably stubborn as our sin is, the source of the church's life, Jesus Christ, is stronger. And because Jesus intercedes for us in our anxiety and confusion, our delusions are answered in his humility, which conquers our fear and restores our relationships. The good news of the Gospel is our common life: we all miss the mark, we all have an ego problem, we are all deluded, and we all find our hope in Jesus.



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