

29 Ord, Sunday B  
Isaiah 53:10-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45  
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Notre Dame Church (Michigan City, IN)  
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In the Broadway musical, “Annie, Get Your Gun,” Annie Oakley and Frank Butler compete with each other as sharpshooters in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Each one brags about being superior to their rival, meanwhile trying to hide their mutual romantic attraction to each other. Their conflict reaches its peak in the Irving Berlin song, “Anything you can do I can do better.” In real life, Annie Oakley and Frank Butler resolved their conflict by becoming husband and wife.

Hopefully, as early as childhood, we learn to doubt anyone who says, “I am the greatest.” All superlatives, applied to one’s self, are expressions of a deeply insecure person. Declarations like “I’m the best ever,” “I know more about this than anyone else,” or “No one has ever done this before me” reflect a person who imagines that he or she is always being observed, and craves that attention. Such a person is likely also to maintain their illusion of superiority by putting other people down.

History is full of men and women who were called “the Great.” Alexander the Great created a Greek empire by conquering Cyrus the Great of Persia, but he was brought down by the bite of a mosquito—malaria. Catherine the Great of Russia modernized her country and expanded its territory, but she only became empress after her lover led a coup to depose her husband. When the sainted John Paul II died, there were popular calls that he be given the title of “Great,” the first pope to be given that title since Gregory in the early middle ages. And John Paul was great in many respects, especially on the world’s political stage. But now his stature is being diminished by the realization that most of the bishops who tried to hide clergy sexual abuse were loyalists appointed by John Paul II during his 27 years as pope, including three promotions of Cardinal McCarrick.

So, in today’s gospel, Jesus was compelled to answer who is the greatest in the kingdom of God by two apostles, James and John, jockeying for power. These two men were bold enough to ask for power out loud, but the reaction of the other ten—“they became indignant”—suggests that they were ambitious too, and

jealous. We should remember that the apostles were still thinking of earthly power in an earthly kingdom led by an earthly messiah.

Jesus does not put them down for their lack of understanding. But he asks, “Can you drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.” Without even asking what this means, they reply confidently, “We can.” Like anyone who thinks he or she is “great,” they are living in illusion.

Jesus promises that they will indeed share in an ordeal similar to his. The book of Acts tells us that James was later put to death by the sword, on the order of King Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2). John too suffered under the persecution of Herod Agrippa, but did not lose his life for the Christian faith. Tradition says that he lived a long time and died of natural causes in Ephesus. We might say that James gave up his life *for the faith*, while John gave his life *to the faith*.

As we look around our world, our country, our Church, we see too many people demanding what James and John demanded of Jesus. Give me power. Give me wealth. Give me comfort. Give me security. Meanwhile, the children, the little ones, the poor—the ones whom Jesus loved—are asking for shelter, for refuge, for food, for escape from violence, for peace, for reunion with their babies and families. Those who fancy themselves “great” lord their authority, power, and greed over them. In the illusion of greatness, they see only themselves.

Instead of living *a life of illusion*, Jesus teaches us to know who we are. Who are we? We are fragile human beings with limited power and righteousness. None of us is great. As Jesus told the young man in last week’s gospel, “God alone is good.” The truth is that none of us is the greatest; God alone is great. But with Christ’s forgiveness and inspiration, we can have a powerful impact—especially if we serve others through our support and our skills.

Greatness consists not in what we have, but in who we are. Or, as Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

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