

“SOMETHING LESS THAN SUPER”
1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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At the outset of his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul pays his readers a remarkable compliment. In order to appreciate this compliment, we have to understand the position that Christians occupy in the first century. They are seen as members of a small, radical sect of Judaism who hold some wild and wacky beliefs. They have the audacity to claim that a young prophet who gets himself executed on a Roman cross is none other than the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, and they further claim that he has been raised from the dead. It's no wonder that followers of Jesus are scorned by the academy and the synagogue and don't enjoy the sanction or sympathy of the state. They come mostly from the lower, uneducated classes of the Roman Empire, and their humble status shows. When Paul describes them as “foolish . . . weak . . . low and despised,” he is just telling it like it is.

The Christians at Corinth are little different from Christians anywhere else. A few people in the congregation have prestigious backgrounds and some possess exceptional gifts; but for the most part, the Corinthians are neither exotic nor extraordinary. The average church member is as common as an old shoe. It almost seems in this letter that Paul is rubbing it in: “. . . not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but” – and this is the shocker – “God chose what is foolish . . . weak . . . low and despised” to be the instruments of God’s purpose (1 Corinthians 1:26b-28). Not the sages, not the rulers, not the royalty; but the average, the non-descript, and the ordinary – these are the people God singles out to occupy first place in the kingdom of God.

To this bunch of nobodies, Paul pays the ultimate compliment: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters” (v. 26a). Paul doesn’t specify here exactly what his readers are called to be or to do, but we can be sure that it’s not something trivial. Throughout his letters, Paul says that Christians are called to be nothing less than imitators of Christ, to claim and use the spiritual gifts they have been given for the work of ministry, to love each other in the same extravagant way God loves all people. If the Corinthians were to stop and consider their call even for a moment, they would bow their heads in wonder and gratitude.

This morning I want to ask you to consider your own call. Lest we forget, Paul’s compliment to the church at Corinth applies equally to the church at Woodbury and to thousands of other congregations just like ours. It’s true that Christians today have more status and influence than our counterparts in the first century. Many of you are well known and play a significant role in this community. But most of us know better than to take our credentials too seriously. On any given day, you and I may feel, not like champions, but like also-rans. Each of us is blessed with talent, but none of us can do all things equally well. Even in my own areas of expertise, I know that I am something less than super. During my first pastorate back in Illinois, an honest and astute friend said to me one day, “John, no matter how good you are, there is somebody out there who can do it better.” That’s putting it mildly!

This may help to explain why truly brilliant people in our world often have a dark underside. Last week I watched the movie *Judy*, which chronicles a period in the life of the legendary singer and actress, Judy Garland. From her earliest days as a childhood star, she was a phenomenon, one of the greatest entertainers of her time. But Judy Garland was also bent on self-destruction. She starved herself in order to look thin on the silver screen; she made poor choices in her relationships with men; she squandered much of her life to alcohol and drug addiction. Judy Garland illustrates that even “the best and the brightest” are afflicted with self-doubt, feelings of inferiority, fear of failure, and envy of others. When we are something less than super, and know that we are, we can begin to feel “foolish . . . weak . . . low and despised.”

Part of the problem lies in the way you and I perceive the wise, the strong, and the highly-esteemed. We have a tendency to put a select few on lofty pedestals and fail to see that their place is precarious, too.

There was a time when “star-gazing” referred to charting the course of celestial objects. At some point, star-gazing was elevated into a kind of religion, called astrology, as people let their actions be guided by the movements of suns and planets. Nowadays, we live our lives with reference to a different galaxy of stars: Americans have made a fetish out of celebrities. A lot of folks are secret “groupies” of people like LeBron James and Lady Gaga. Their fans follow the details of their lives with the curiosity and determination of detectives. Of course, celebrities have made it easy for us. Anyone who has survived four marriages and two trips to rehab feels qualified and compelled to write an autobiography or post their daily activities on Twitter. Celebrities have become the trend-setters in the worlds of fashion, exercise, and diet. They’ve even become role models for the way we conduct our relationships. What a terrible burden it must be for them to carry. In our time, an ordinary star is destined to be out of work; job security lies in becoming a “superstar.”

On this Super Bowl Sunday, it’s worth noting that the word “super” has become the new test of excellence in our culture. When I was a boy, this prefix was used in only two settings that I can remember. “Super” was used to describe a grocery store that brought under one roof all of a family’s household needs. “Super” also referred to a one-of-a-kind man who could leap tall buildings in a single bound. Today, “super” status is applied to or expected of just about everything and everybody. We have Supermom and Superdad, super-malls and supers-savings, super-ships and super-corporations – and the worst travesty of all, super-churches and super-pastors. It’s no wonder that the Super Bowl cannot be played on any ordinary Sabbath day. It has to be played on Super Sunday, which, by the way, no one confuses with Easter Sunday.

The overuse of the word “super” is testimony to our inflation of the English language and our distortion of reality. What we tend to forget is that superstars often behave more like meteors than suns. That is, they flash for an instant and then disappear forever. A former Super Bowl quarterback named Jim Plunkett once reflected on the highs and lows of his football career. He said, “Nothing recedes like success.” People in all walks of life can testify to that truth – just ask O.J. Simpson, Bill Cosby, or Harvey Weinstein. Or closer to home, just ask the corporate executive who gets laid off when his company decides to downsize. “Nothing recedes like success.”

This past week, the U.S. Senate has been engaged in a historic debate about the impeachment of the President, and football fans have been looking forward to the best Super

Bowl matchup in recent memory. But the biggest story in the news was the tragic death of basketball icon Kobe Bryant, his daughter Gigi, and seven other persons in a helicopter crash last Sunday outside Los Angeles.

Kobe Bryant was the very definition of the term “superstar” – a supremely gifted athlete with a magnetic personality. His untimely passing reminds us of two things: superstars are mortals whose lives are as fragile as anyone else’s, and they are also regular people with families who love them and depend upon them. Of course, Kobe has been remembered all week for his exploits on the basketball court; but the most touching tributes have been about his role as a husband and father. Ironically, he chartered helicopters so he could bypass LA traffic and spend more time with his family, and he spent countless hours mentoring his oldest daughter in the game of basketball. Kobe Bryant, the superstar, was also Kobe Bryant, the man – a man whose most extraordinary achievement was doing ordinary things that all good fathers do, and who was vulnerable to the same risks and dangers that every mortal is subject to.

The apostle Paul would not be surprised by any of this. In the perspective of eternity, Paul says, the life expectancy of celebrities is what the pop artist Andy Warhol predicted it would be: about fifteen minutes. Society’s elites are no different from ordinary folk: here today, gone tomorrow. And so, you and I do well not to over-estimate the wisdom of the wise, the strength of the strong, or the reputation of the famous. In the end, Paul says, God wills “to reduce to nothing things that are” (v. 28) – even if they are super.

By the same token, you and I do well not to under-estimate ourselves if we are only ordinary. As a case in point, I’ve read about the existence of a most unlikely organization, the “International Dull People’s Club.” The founder and president is Joseph Troise, who claims to speak for millions of Americans who, like himself, do not wear designer jeans, are not listed in Who’s Who, have never joined a fitness club, and wear pajamas to bed. Mr. Troise hails dull people as America’s great unsung strength. As he puts it, “It is the dull who fix our cars, run our elevators, drive our cabs, type our reports, do our accounting, and brush the branches, so to speak, over the trail of our past deeds.” At last report one of the members of this club was setting out to compile an official *Who’s Nobody in America*. The book will include well over 300 million entries – everyone who is not listed in *Who’s Who in America*!

This story makes a tongue-in-cheek point that most pastors would have no trouble validating. The great majority of people in our churches are nondescript by Hollywood standards. Ordinary people showing extraordinary commitment are the strength of every congregation. Celebrity preachers have their glitter; but at the end of the day, the common people, like those who hear Jesus gladly, are the salt of the earth and the pillars of the Church. These are the folks who make the coffee, pay the bills, repair the leaks, mow the lawn, prepare the Communion table, teach children’s Sunday School, and count the offering. They may never make headlines or earn a salary in six figures; but they show up and serve faithfully, and – as Jesus reminds us in his Beatitudes – to such belongs the kingdom of God.

Friends, the grace of God is a great equalizer. Our standing before the Almighty doesn’t depend on the pedigrees we have inherited or the degrees we have earned. Our standing is fixed, not by what we have done, but by what God has done for us. This being the case, superstars and “just plain folks” have equal worth in the sight of God and equal merit in the company of God’s people. This is nowhere more evident than at the Lord’s Table, where the wealthy and the wise

kneel alongside the lowly and the unlearned, and where we all receive the same amount of bread and grape juice.

And so, if you happen to be highly intelligent and strong and well-bred, remember that most of what you are is a gift from God in the first place. Therefore, says Paul, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (v. 31).

However, if you feel, as I do, that you are something less than super, that your star shines less brightly than someone else’s, take heart. “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters.” Not many of us are superstar material, but God chooses us anyway; and those whom God chooses, God uses to the fullest. Ordinary people showing extraordinary commitment – this is God’s call; this is our hope.