

"DRINKING FROM HIS CUP"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Just what is it about some people that seems to set them apart from the crowd? What is it that causes other people to put them up there on a pedestal...to hold them in awe? We do this, you know.

It happens in politics, in sports, in the arts. I read somewhere recently that Stan Musial of the St. Louis Cardinals was that kind of a man...a super-star. Quite a few boys in St. Louis were named for him back in the forties and the fifties. Tim McCarver was telling us on television recently about the day that the Cardinals flew from Philadelphia to St. Louis following a game. Ordinarily, this would have been about a four and a half hour trip back in the nineteen forties. When they got on the plane, one of the players, Walt "Moose" Moryn, a big burly outfielder with the Cards told McCarver that he didn't feel "comfortable" about making this flight because Stan Musial wasn't on the plane with them. Musial had to come to New York for something and couldn't make the trip to St. Louis.

About a quarter of the way to St. Louis, one of the props on the plane stopped working and the plane had to turn around and return to Philadelphia. As the team disembarked, a bit weary and anxious, "Moose" Moryn shaking his head said to Tim McCarver,

"See I was right....if Stan had been here with us on the plane this would never have happened...."

It sounds a bit crazy, but Moryn believed it and so did all the other players. Remember Kyle Rote, the former All American from SMU and a Giant football player for 11 seasons? Well, he had the same effect on his teammates. They say that fourteen of his teammates named their sons, Kyle, after him.

DEVELOPMENT

"How do you know that Hercules is a god?" Iole is asked in an ancient Greek legend. She replies,

"I know because he conquered whether he stood or walked or sat...or whatever he did!"

Yes, some people have that kind of effect on those around them. And Jesus certainly did! He inspired enough awe in Simon Peter that on one occasion Peter tried walking on water. Crowds flocked from far and near to hear Him...to touch Him, just to be near Him. Yes, there was something different about this man.

The mother of James and John knew that He was someone special. One day she knelt before Him to make a request. "What do you want?" He asked. She said,

"Command that these two sons of mine may sit - one at Your right hand and one at Your left...in Your Kingdom."

And Jesus said to her, "You do not know what you are asking". Then turning to James and John, He asked that searching question, "Are you...are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They replied, "We are able, Lord" Then He said, "You will drink My cup, but to sit at My right hand and at My left is not mine to grant..."

NO REJECTION OF ASPIRATIONS TO GREATNESS

Three comments. The first thing to notice here is that Jesus was not in any way rejecting their aspirations to greatness. No put down of them for this and I think it's important for us to pick up on that.

For there have been times when the Christian life has been viewed as a bit of rationalization for doing nothing, for allowing fate to determine our human destinies, for being passive and refusing to take responsibility for life. At such times we tend to forget that God has created us in His own image and has given us the ability to act, to contribute, to dream, to grow, to plan. He has placed within us the desire to achieve, yes - to lead the parade, to stand out from the crowd. And the only time when that is wrong when it becomes the dominant note or influence in our lives, when it causes us to devalue and demean others, when it becomes destructive to the truly important values of life.

This drive for greatness can get out of control in lives. There are those who abuse it. It can be perverted. We see it from time to time.

It was back on New Year's Day in the year 1967 that a military officer by the name of Colonel Jean-Bedel Bokassa seized power in the Central Africa Republic. He claimed that his act was designed to keep the Communists from taking over. His country was small. It was landlocked and under-developed. It had the dubious distinction of being one of the poorest nations on the face of the earth...its 2.2 million people had a per capita income of something like \$100 a year and the literacy rate was about 8%.

Bokassa, however, filled with a sense of self-importance, named himself "president" for life and awarded himself so many medals that he soon needed a specially designed coat to wear them all. He began to amass a huge fortune at the same time that his country was defaulting on its debts and sliding more and more into bankruptcy. A military state emerged which created terror and kept the people in check.

His aspirations went even higher. Convinced now that he was something of a "modern-day" Napoleon, he proclaimed himself in December of 1976, Emperor Bokassa I of the Central African Empire. His coronation cost something like 30 million dollars and he gave himself such handsome gifts as a six-foot diamond sceptre and a 24 foot red velvet robe and a two-ton gold-plated throne to sit on. A television reporter once asked him how he could justify such expenditures and he replied,

"One cannot create a great history without sacrifices."

Bokassa is no longer with us. His own people rose up in anger and cast him down.

The desire for greatness can be perverted, but it can also be a gift from God. People who have made a difference in this world have been those who have been "driven" by an inner need to excel and this "drive" has led them to some extraordinary achievements. The world needs such people - whether in the medical lab, the class room, the halls of government, in the media, in business - and yes - even in the service of Christ.

It is all right to aspire to greatness...unless, of course, the greatness comes at the expense of others. Point one. Move on with me now to another point.

GREATNESS HAS ITS PRICE

But greatness - and this is the second thought - greatness has its price. It does not come free.

We're coming to that time of the year when the "great ones" of golf will soon gather in Augusta for the Masters. Among those arriving for this ritual of Spring in Georgia will be South Africa's Gary Player. This man who always dressed in black is a man for whom faith and accomplishment are important. He won more international golf tournaments in his prime than anyone else in golf and he still continues to every now and then on the Senior's Tour.

People have often come up to Gary Player in a tournament and said to him, "I'd give anything if I could hit a golf ball like you!" One tough, demanding day on the links, a tired and frustrated Gary Player heard the same refrain, "I'd give anything to be able to hit a golf ball like you". Only this time, Player's usual politeness failed him as he growled back at this spectator,

"No you wouldn't. You'd give anything to hit a golf ball like me...if it was easy! Friend, do you know what you've got to do to hit a golf ball like me? You've got to get up at five o'clock in the morning and go out on the course and hit a thousand golf balls. Your hand starts to bleed and you walk over to the Clubhouse and wash the blood off your hand, slap a bandage on it and then go back out and hit another thousand golf balls...concentrating on what you're doing. That's what it takes to hit a golf ball like me."

In his own way, Gary Player was asking, "Are you able to drink from the cup from which I drink?"

Move from golf to the violin. The same thing holds true. So you want to be a world-famous violinist like Isaac Stern? Then be prepared to practice eight hours a day beginning at the age of eight. That was his secret. What does that delightful ad say...you've seen it..."How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" Practice. Practice. Practice. (Do I get an 'amen' from the organ console on that?)

Or perhaps there is that 14 year old boy in our midst this morning who would like to play professional football...you know, the way the immortal Walter Payton did. Then be prepared, young man, to run up a high hill every day until you throw up. That's what Payton did, they say, on a hill near his home in the off-season. And when he threw up, he would then quit for the day and go home and study.

Greatness has its price. Jesus asked His ambitious disciples that day long ago as they made their way up to Jerusalem for the events of Palm Sunday. "Are you able to drink from the cup from which I drink?" It always amazes me how many people come along and adopt the Christian faith as their own with the thought that it really won't cost them anything. This cup that Jesus drank from was the cup of the cross and the sacrifice He made was the ultimate sacrifice... complete and final. And if we think that we can achieve greatness in the Kingdom of God with a "token"... "luke-warm"... half-hearted commitment, we are sadly mistaken. Greatness in His Kingdom is also costly. We may not enjoy hearing that.

I once read that back in medieval times in Europe it was not at all uncommon for devout Christians to pray for the marks of Jesus to appear on their hands and their feet. This was seen as a sign of deep spirituality.

One night, while praying for those marks, a monk had a vision of Christ which left another mark on his body. It was a bruise on his shoulder and that bruise came from carrying His cross. This monk came to realize that this was "the mark" that really counted! The "bruise" that comes from carrying the weight of Christ's cross on the shoulder.

It is acceptable...even admirable...to aspire to greatness, but remember this: whatever the field, greatness has its price. It is not free. It costs.

"KINGDOM" GREATNESS COMES THROUGH SERVICE

And one more point to lift up in connection with this text from Matthew's Gospel. Greatness in His Kingdom always comes through service.

This is something that rings true in all of life and one wonders why more can't see it? The most trusted politician is the one who best serves his country and the teacher who is most fondly remembered is the one who best serves his students and the most respected and successful business person is the one who best serves his customers. Greatness is not measured in cars or homes or stocks and bonds or balances or Oscars. Society may pause to reward us for our service, but that is secondary. He is greatest who knows how to serve.

Amy Carmichael was an incredible woman who for more than two decades administered an orphanage in India from her bed. Billy Graham, they say, once visited Dohnavur - Carmichael's Home for Destitute Girls - and was so moved by what he saw that he had to excuse himself for several minutes so he could weep in private...so great was her devotion and so greatly moved was he by it. Amy Carmichael was able to drink from Christ's cup!

Author, explorer and medical missionary, Dr. David Livingstone, spent most of his adult life living in primitive conditions in Africa back in the eighteenth century. One day out in the wilds of Africa...exploring...David Livingstone received a letter from some very well-meaning friends which read,

"We would like to send other men to you. Have you found a good road in to your area yet?"

Back went his reply to those well-meaning friends back in London,

"If you have men who will only come if they know there is a good road, I don't really want them. I want men - strong and courageous - who will come if there is no road at all...."

CLOSING

That's more of the spirit of Christ. The Palm Sunday road wasn't much of a road. Christ walked it as He was later to walk that week the Via Dolorosa. As we pause this morning to break the bread and drink from the cup, we need to ask ourselves the same question He asked James and John, "Are you able to drink from My cup?"...the cup of self-giving love...the cup of self-denial, of sacrifice, of service in His name. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant". (Matthew 20: verse 26)

Aspire after greatness. Pay the price of greatness. But always remember that lasting greatness comes through service.

CLOSING

Some words spoken by Albert Schweitzer at a High School graduation exercise have stayed with me across the years and I share them with you in closing:

"I do not know in to what fields you have chosen to go or what paths you will follow in years ahead, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who will have sought and found out how to serve".

A nice note on which to end this Communion meditation.

PRAYER

O God, we thank You from the bottom of our hearts for the life that was in Jesus. Help us now in these days leading us to Palm Sunday and Holy Week and Easter to understand more clearly and more fully than ever before and to appreciate more completely what that life was really like until we finally kneel before Him and adore Him and let His life lift up our lives to be with Him...no matter what the cost, no matter where His path may lead us.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care and Your warming, healing Presence...these we mention in our hearts at this time.

Point our makers along the way for those who we feel may be in danger of losing their way...their names are known to you. Be at work in their lives.

In the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord, we now pray. Amen.