"SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THUNDER"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 16, 1994
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INTRODUCTION
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DEVELOPMENT
A rather ridiculous story to expose a rather ridiculous emotion, but it does help to lead us into today's sermon for it serves to remind us that there is a drive within the heart of everyone of us to have the biggest and the best. Or, to put it simply: we all want to be NO 1.

Today's Scripture passage tells us of how two of the disciples of Jesus, James and John, came to Jesus with something of a special request...in private, please note...away from the other disciples. We find them asking Jesus:

"Teacher...we want to ask You to do something special for us". (Uh-oh...we've all lived long enough to be careful when someone asks us in private to grant a favor before they specify what the favor is...so watch out, Jesus). They said to Him, "Grant us, Lord...to sit...one at Your right hand and one at Your left hand, in Your glory!"

So...this is what discipleship is all about? A bit of a power play "up there" in the Executive Suite? James and John, remember, were brothers who had left their father, Zebedee, sitting in his boat in the middle of a lake while they ran off to follow Jesus. And being part of the inner circle, along with Peter, they undoubtedly felt they should have the top positions in the coming Jesus Kingdom.

One wonders...is there anyone present here this morning who cannot relate to James and John? Lift a hand, I'd like to know. Why...this drive to be NO. I is one of the most common instincts of humanity. We all have a touch of it. And if that doesn't heat up your microwave, my friend, then you're not really plugged in to life.

July was named after Julius Caesar. And not to be outdone, the Emperor Augustus called the following month of August after himself and since that month had only 30 days at the time, he borrowed a day from February and added it on to
August just to make sure his month would not be inferior to that of Julius Caesar's. Augustus was a spiritual ancestor of James and John.

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James and John envisioned themselves - one at the right hand and the other at the left hand of Jesus in His coming Kingdom. They saw themselves as VIPs, perhaps one as Secretary of State and the other as Secretary of Defense. They longed to have those positions of prestige and power, but remember how Jesus quietly said to them,

"You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" To which the brothers replied, "Lord...we are able!"

They were not lacking in confidence

One thing about James and John is that they were certainly not lacking in confidence and that's healthy. Many years ago when I was first starting out in this city and conference, there was a preacher by the name of J. Wallace Hamilton who used to come up here from Florida and preach at conference. He was good. I bought all of his books and remember one in particular that was entitled, The Drum Major Instinct. There is that drive within all of us to lead the parade, to be number one and he saw it as good - up to a point.

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"I never put on a uniform to play a game. I put on a uniform to WIN". "To WIN".

Think about those words for a moment. This former Hoosier who once even worked as a garbage truck collector before finding his niche in basketball said something that you and I would do well to apply to our faith. If you are truly committed, my friend, you will never be satisfied with just "playing"...just "going through the motions". You play to win!
Sports Illustrated had an article sometime back about a winning streak put together by a team in the Dayville High School, Dayville, Oregon. The men in the congregation will respond to this. It seems that the girls Volleyball Team at the Dayville High School put together a winning streak of 65 consecutive games. And what makes this streak so appealing is that Dayville High School has only 18 female students. Sixteen of them are on the volleyball squad and the 17th keeps score. Don't ask me about the 18th.

They won the Class A Volleyball Championship for three years running. Not bad for a small Class B High School. Part of the success was due to some "unbridled optimism". And the letter...the article...that shared word of this streak said that after the defeat, the team rebounded and already has a new winning streak of ONE!!

Now the point I'm leading up to make is this. The men and the women who signed up to go with Jesus were not wimps. They were strong, confident people who didn't mind risking their lives for what they believed in. James and John were later called the "Sons of Thunder". And remember that Peter even tried to take on an entire Roman garrison by himself when they came to arrest Jesus that night in Gethsemane's Garden.

There are times when I think that we Christians focus too much on the teachings of Jesus about humility and meekness. I don't think that Jesus ever intended for his followers to become Casper Milquetoast individuals. Indeed, quite the contrary. Jesus would probably tell us that the "wimps" are more of a problem to him than these "Sons of Thunder". The "wimps" make the faith look weak and pathetic and it's not. The "wimps" have difficulty in standing up and being counted. They are followers. Not leaders. Jesus could do with a few more people who are blessed with this "Drum Major Instinct"...people who are willing to step out from the crowd and make a difference.

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GREATNESS COMES IN SERVING OTHERS  Back to our text. Before long, of course, this private little conversation between Jesus and the two brothers filtered back to the other ten disciples and as you might well imagine, they were upset, turned off by this nonsense. They were probably angry with James and John for sneaking off and cornering Jesus in this way. They, too, probably were longing for the top positions in the coming kingdom. They, too, dreamed a bit about power and prestige, but AH...so much for unity among the twelve. Now they were arguing among themselves and at this point Jesus got them all together in a huddle. He didn't scold them. He didn't make James and John feel small, but rather He showed them an alternative path to greatness and this is important for us to take in.

Instead of thinking in worldly ways of success and power and privilege, He taught them, saying:

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all."

(Mark 10: 43, 44)
I'm sure that James and John didn't have this in mind, nor did the others. Jesus was turning their notion of greatness upside down as He went on to teach them that in His Kingdom true greatness is found in serving others. It was true then and it is true now.

I think Jesus knew what it is to be human. I think He knew that when we accomplish something, we want some recognition. We want our awards, our ribbons, our plaques to hang on our walls and to decorate our coffee tables. We want others to know what we've done. He understands all of that, but what He wants us to know is that true greatness is found in service - service to the community, service to our churches, service to the least and the lowest. But go back for a moment to our text, back to James and John. They were tempted, it seems to me, to take the easy road, the lower road...not the high road. At that moment, they did not understand that service is the "key" to greatness, not prestige and power.

And even more important, service is what the Jesus kingdom is all about. As Jesus said about His own life in this passage,

"For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Some of the Baptists present may recognize the name of Stephen Olford who for a number of years was the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church here in our own city on West 57th Street. In his book, Committed To Christ and His Church, Stephen Olford writes of a Doug Meland who along with his wife went to serve the cause of Christ in Brazil, in a village of Brazil's Fulnio Indians.

Upon his arrival there, Doug Meland was first referred to as "the WHITE man", a somewhat uncomplimentary term among the Indians because of what other white men had done to them in exploiting the villagers...burning their homes, robbing their lands. But after Doug and his wife had learned a bit of their language and began to help the villagers with medicine and in other ways, they began to call Doug, "the GOOD WHITE man". Months passed and slowly Doug and his wife began to adopt the customs of these Indian villagers and as they did the Fulnio Indians came to speak of Doug as "the WHITE INDIAN".

One terribly hot day as Doug was washing the dirty, blood-caked foot of a young injured Indian boy, he heard a bystander whisper:

"Who ever heard of a white man washing an Indian's foot?"
"Certainly this man is from God!" And from that day on, whenever Doug Meland entered an Indian home, the news would be announced, "Here comes the man whom God has sent us!"
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CLOSING Down to this very hour and to this very place, the secret of greatness continues to be service. Service is the chief characteristic of those who try to follow in the steps of Jesus. I would hope that each of you will want to run a bit of a service check as a result of today's scripture passage. How do you measure up? Remember His words to James and John and Peter and the others who had their hearts set on being at His right hand and at His left in His glory. He quietly said to the twelve:

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PRAYER

Let our prayer be a silent searching of our own hearts in these quiet moments. And confirm within us the decisions, the resolutions and the intentions of these moments.

"Teach us, Good Lord, to serve You more faithfully. To give and not to count the cost. To fight and not to heed the wounds. To toil and not to seek for rest. To labor and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do Your will."

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