

True Greatness

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The Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Celebrating Bread for the World

Isaiah 10:1-4; Hebrews 5:1-4; Mark 10:35-45

Text: "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant." -- Mark 10:43

What difference, do you think, can one person make? With more than six billion of us on the planet right now, and with that number expected to continue to rise, especially in the earth's poorest regions, and with all six billion of us facing staggeringly difficult and complex problems, what difference can one person reasonably expect to make?

That was the question, more or less, a reporter once put to Mother Teresa, the Albanian-born nun who set up clinics, orphanages, hospices, counseling centers, and schools first in India and later around the world to care for the poorest of the poor. For more than forty-five years, Mother Teresa – now Blessed Teresa – of Calcutta, ministered to the poor, the sick, the dying, and the abandoned, one person at a time. Do you really think you're being successful, the reporter asked, in the face of a system that produces need much faster than you can meet it? Teresa is reported to have replied, "God has not called me to be successful. God has called me to be faithful." And so her work goes on, around the world, one poor, sick, dying, and abandoned person at a time.

The hard-bitten cynics among us – and they are many and they powerfully influence the way many people think about the world – would sneer at the efforts of a poor nun caring for poor people in the midst of global social and political and economic arrangements that produce poor people hundreds, thousands, and hundreds of thousands of times faster than that same system produces rich or even comfortable people. A cynic would quote Jesus' words -- "You will always have the poor with you" -- to people like Mother Teresa and advise them to stop wasting their time trying to stem, with their pathetically limited resources, an oceanic tide of suffering and misery. The world of nature is "red in tooth and claw," and the social world we humans have constructed is hardly less cold and heartless, pitting the few haves against the many have-nots, and neither of those worlds seems likely to change dramatically any time soon. We seem to be stuck with the odds against us, and most people have chosen a "get while the gettin's good" lifestyle and try to make the best of a bad situation for themselves and their nearest and dearest.

Most, perhaps, but not all. In every age and in every place where human beings have existed, there have always been a few – sometimes a precious few, but a few nonetheless – who have chosen a different path. They have chosen the path of greatness, true greatness, laid out for us in this morning's Gospel reading: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant." If you would be great, my friends, truly great, that's the path to it.

Now I realize, of course, that most of us aren't interested in being great; we're interested in being comfortable. We call ourselves followers of Jesus for good reason, because we're pretty much like his first followers, and most of them weren't interested in greatness, either; but James and John were and, typical for disciples then and now, they

got it all wrong. They understood greatness as most human beings have understood it: honor, comfort, and the ability to control others. Being Jesus' left- and right-hand men when he came in his glory to knock heads, that's how those sons of Zebedee understood greatness.

But Jesus said true greatness was different. "For the Human One came not to be served, but to serve, and to ransom many with his life."

We are ransomed, you and I – saved, redeemed, reconciled to God, whatever you wish to call our ultimate God-willed destiny – not by being served, by Jesus or anyone else, but by serving. We are ransomed from this world, red in tooth and claw and custom and law, not by spaceship Jesus whisking us off to heaven, but by bringing to life in our every living day the eternal life of the quintessential Human One, the one who came to seek and save the lost.

If you doubt the difference one life can make, ask yourself what difference his one life made. One solitary life of a Palestinian teacher and healer from a backwater of the Roman empire. One life lived in its entirety within fifty miles of where he was born. One life of no possessions, no family, no honors, no bank account, no investments, no weapons or troops. A life lived solely and wholly in the service of God's love for the world. A life we call divine. A life we call the Christ.

Norman Borlaug is probably a name unfamiliar to most of you; it was to me until he died a few weeks ago and I read about him in the newspaper. Norman Borlaug is sometimes called the father of the green revolution, referring not to green as we use the word today to mean environmentally friendly, but green in the sense of being able to grow green plants for food in areas where people have struggled for centuries to get enough to eat.

Norman Borlaug was a scientist, specifically a botanist, who spent his entire working life developing high-yield crops that could feed far more people on an acre of land than traditional crops could feed, and largely thanks to his efforts, crop production more than doubled between 1960 and 1990, and in places like India and Pakistan, grain yields more than quadrupled. Those high yields averted famine during the second half of the twentieth century, as the world's population exploded, and it's been estimated that the efforts of Norman Borlaug, one man, saved as many as a billion people from starvation. One official at the United Nations World Food Program has said that Norman Borlaug saved more people from death than any other person in all of human history. And how did he do it? He served. He gave his life in service to finding better ways to breed and grow food crops. He gave his life to ransom millions – perhaps a billion – from hunger, poverty, and disease. Norman Borlaug was truly great. Was he a Christian? I have no idea. Was he a follower of the way of Jesus Christ? I have no doubt.

Today we join with many other Christians to celebrate the thirty-fifth anniversary of Bread for the World, an organization that has devoted itself to the same work to which Norman Borlaug gave his time, energy, and talents. Bread for the World is an organization that attempts to make ordinary people like us great. It tries to put into practice Jesus' words about true greatness. It serves the hungry people of the world by helping those of us who are not hungry to work for justice, for changing those systems that keep many people hungry and only a few people well fed. Being part of Bread for the World expands the ministry of this congregation beyond our direct, hands-on care for the hungry through Loaves and Fishes, our food pantry, and our support for the Cleveland Food Bank, and helps us to influence for the better the vast resources that can make a difference in millions – billions – of lives. Bread for the World is part of our ministry to bring food – spiritual and physical – to a hungry world, and we celebrate its ministry and ours today.

If the numbers of dead and dying churches is any indication, lots of folks have decided that organized religion is too quaint or old-fashioned for them. Sunday morning is better spent with the newspaper or the kids or at the park or at the gym. Perhaps for

some people that may indeed be the case; they're better off there than here.

But for the rest of us – for most of us, I suspect – the Christian church still has a message worth telling and worth hearing, Sunday after Sunday, week in and week out, and that message is that greatness, true greatness, comes not from getting the house, the job, the car, the trophy wife, the sexy body, or the title, but rather from giving our selves, our best selves, away through serving God in the world. Christianity hasn't survived for two thousand years and claimed at least the nominal allegiance of a third of the world's people by telling lies; it's survived by telling the truth, the truth that leads to eternal life: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant."

Let us pray.

*Lord, make us instruments of your peace;
where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master,
grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*

Amen.