

## “Get Your Throne Here!”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “GETTING BACK TO THE HEART OF MISSION”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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### MARK 10:35-45

<sup>35</sup>James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

<sup>36</sup>And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?”

<sup>37</sup>And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

<sup>38</sup>But Jesus 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?”

<sup>39</sup>They replied, “We are able.”

Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; <sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

<sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

<sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

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**T**his little squabble sounds like something straight out of a second grade classroom, doesn't it? You have James and John – the “sons of entitlement” – as one commentator called them, asking Jesus to “do whatever they ask.” That's a bold request don't you think? They want Jesus to guarantee he will do their bidding before they even tell him what they want.

Jesus, wiser than that, asks his own question: “what is it you want me to do for you?” They tell him they want their

own thrones beside his. When you come into your glory, let us be your right and left hand men, they ask. It's as if Jesus were a carnival barker shouting out to anyone who would come, “Get your throne here, get your throne right here!”

What Jesus actually says, in effect, is, “Oh, you'll get yours, you just wait!” But he isn't talking about the kind of throne they are talking about. He warns them that their request might get them unexpected results. It is a warning we should all remember. It is the same

warning as the one that says, “be careful what you pray for, you may get it.”

Then all the other disciples are outraged, jealous, angry with their pompous and presumptuous and weasily classmates John and James, says Mark. Jesus has to calm them down by pointing out that the Reign of God will be quite different in the way it uses power than the Caesars’ and Hitlers’ and Pol Pots’ of the world.

I believe the point of this passage is to serve as a warning to all of us who want to turn God into a wish-granting fairy or a cosmic Santa Claus. It also serves to warn us that God wasn’t interested in sending Jesus to lead some human revolution or even preside over a mortal government. Jesus came to show that God’s focus was much greater than that, and also much smaller. God wanted to show us a life-focus, an eternal value system. He wanted to show us the kind of throne he thought worthwhile for all humanity. The problem is that most of us would much rather act like little Napoleon’s than like Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther King commented on this in a speech in 1968. He called it the “drum-major instinct.” He said, before we condemn James and John, “let us see that we all have the drum major instinct. We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade.” Alfred Adler, the great psychoanalyst, called this “quest for recognition, this desire for attention, ... the basic impulse, the basic drive of human life, this drum major instinct.”

King goes on to say, “you know, we begin early to ask life to put us first.

Our first cry as a baby was a bid for attention.... Children ask life to grant them first place. They are a little bundle of ego.... Now in adult life, we still have it, and we really never get by it. We like to do something good, [and] we like to be praised for it.... Everybody likes it, as a matter of fact. And somehow this warm glow we feel when we are praised or when our name is in print is something of the vitamin A to our ego.”

I don’t have a large desire for fame or to have the power to lead some great mega-church, but it was nice that Maria and Twila took the time to decorate my office and give me cards and gifts for Bosses’ Day. I especially liked the donuts, too. So even though we may not all feel a need to send up a helium balloon and tell all the national TV news folks our six-year-old boy might be in it, we all like a little attention.

But King also brings up the larger and more dangerous dimensions of this desire to “be #1.” He points out that this egotistical desire is true in racial, religious, and national matters as well. It is of course at the heart of racism and prejudice, this belief that somehow equality diminishes us. If we are not superior to someone else then somehow we are inferior. Races do it to each other. Religions do it too. Christianity has a long history of looking at other religions as inferior. Denominations within Christianity often trumpet how if you are not part of them you are not good enough, you are inferior.

King pointed out in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, that nations do it as well. Things haven’t changed

much in forty years, either. King said, “I would submit to you this morning that what is wrong in the world today is that the nations of the world are engaged in a bitter, colossal contest for supremacy. And if something doesn’t happen to stop this trend, .... somebody’s going to make the mistake through our senseless blunderings of dropping a nuclear bomb somewhere. And then another one is going to drop. And don’t let anybody fool you, this can happen within a matter of seconds. .... And I am sad to say that the nation in which we live is the supreme culprit. And I’m going to continue to say it to America, because I love this country too much to see the drift that it has taken.”

Then King brings this to the theological point that I think is most appropriate today. He said, “God didn’t call America to ... be the world’s drum major, to call attention to itself for its greatness or its glory. God called America to use its resources as God would use them, not for vain glory or selfish satisfaction, but for service to the least and the lost, for feeding the hungry, insuring the little child, caring for the elderly widow.” And he added, “Everybody can be great ... because anybody can serve.” Now there, it seems to me is the heart of what Jesus was hoping James and John and you and I would learn from this little episode.

Instead the need to be “#1” continues to drive us. William Willimon says, “Years ago my church hired a consultant to teach us how to grow our congregation.” The consultant told them they needed to “find where people itch; then find a way for the church to scratch

that itch.” The church should strive to meet people’s “felt needs,” he said.

Willimon adds, “Mark certainly wants to reach people with the message of Christ. Mark’s gospel begins with “Here is the good news of Jesus Christ.” Remarkably, when compared with the way we talk about Jesus, Mark has little to say about our felt needs. Mark mainly talks just about Jesus. And when he talks about Jesus, it’s not Jesus as the answer to our problems that Mark stresses but, rather, Jesus as a strange and demanding Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

Deciding to follow Jesus isn’t a pathway to glory as the world defines it, it is a pathway to service and mission. If our heart is set on personal glory or privilege the Christian way will not satisfy. There are those who will twist the Christian message to make it seem that somehow it is a prescription for health, wealth, and happiness, but that is not where we will find the heart of the Christian mission, or of the Lord who calls us to it. We don’t even have to be glorious in the world’s eyes to find ourselves at the heart of the mission of God. It is as simple as carrying out our purpose right where we sit, right where we work, live, eat, and play.

Someone handed me a story recently of a cab driver that discovered this truth. Seems this certain cab driver arrived late one night to pick up a fare. It was his last call and it was tempting to drive away when the person didn’t immediately show up, but somehow he felt the call to go up to the door and knock. He heard a frail, elderly voice

<sup>1</sup> Willimon, “Good News?”, Day1.org, October 18, 2009.

call out: “Just a minute.” It was a woman in her 80’s wearing her Sunday best and carrying a small suitcase. The cab driver could see inside the apartment and realized the place was empty. There were no pictures on the wall and the furniture was gone.

He helped her out with her bag and she asked if he could drive her through downtown. He told her it wasn’t the shortest route to her address, but she said she didn’t mind. Then she added that she was on her way to hospice. She had no family left, the doctors told her she had only a few weeks left and she wanted to see a few things from “the old days,” as she put it.

When he heard that the cab driver reached over and shut off the meter and told her they could go by anything she wanted to see, no charge. So they went by the house where she grew up, the office building where she had been a secretary, and the neighborhood where she and her husband bought their first house. Finally, she told him to head to the hospice, she was tired. When they got there she got out and the attendants met her and helped her inside. Just before she left he bent down and gave her a hug and a kiss and she thanked him for everything. As she went through the door he thought about how easy it would have been to miss that experience. He could have ended his shift early, or honked once and driven off when she didn’t come out immediately. He said, “we’re conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments, but often great moments come wrapped in ordinary moments that would seem insignificant at first glance.”

Martin Luther King ended his sermon about the “drum-major instinct” by saying much the same thing in a powerful way:

“Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won’t have any money to leave behind. I won’t have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.” Then he quotes the poet, saying,

*If I can help somebody as I pass along,  
If I can cheer somebody with a word or song,*

*If I can show somebody he’s traveling wrong,*

*Then my living will not be in vain.*

*If I can do my duty as a Christian ought,*

*If I can bring salvation to a world once wrought,*

*If I can spread the message as the master taught,*

*Then my living will not be in vain.<sup>2</sup>*

So the reality is the heart of mission can be found right where we are in the midst of everyday life. And the fact is you and I CAN get our throne here. It is in the shape of a cross.  
AMEN.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, jr., “The Drum Major Instinct,” delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, on 4 February 1968, blackwebportal.com.