

“True Greatness”

Mark 9:30-37 James 3:13-4:6

Sunday September 24, 2006

To help us explore these passages today I am going to draw on one of the great theologians of our time Mac Davis! You won't find him on my bookshelves. You'll find him in my CD collection. I'm not a big country fan but sometimes I do love to listen to the stories the songs tell. They do give us glimpses into the human spirit.

I'm going to play one Mac Davis' better known songs. Feel free to join in on the chorus. Oh, since the problem Mac is singing about is not just a “guy thing”, the women are invited to substitute “gal” for “man.”

(play the song “Oh Lord Its Hard to Be Humble”)

(chorus)

Oh Lord it's hard to be humble
When you're perfect in every way
I can't wait to look in the mirror
'Cos I get better lookin each day
To know me is to love me
I must be a hell of a man/gal
Oh Lord, its hard to be humble
But I'm doing the best that I can.

I used to have a girlfriend
But I guess she just couldn't compete
With all those love starved women
Who keep clamoring at my feet
Well, I probably could find me another
But I guess they're all in awe of me
Who cares I never get lonesome
'Cos I treasure my own company

(chorus)

I guess you could say I'm a loner
A cowboy all locked up and proud
I could have lots of friends if I wanted
But then I wouldn't stand out in a crowd
Some folks say I'm egotistical
Hell. I don't even know what that means
I guess it has something to do with the way
That I fill out skin tight jeans

(chorus)

Well Jesus and the disciples are on a road trip through Galilee and as they are walking along Jesus once again tries to tell the disciples that he is going to be crucified by the authorities and raised by God on the third day. You will recall that the last time Jesus tried to tell them this Peter rebuked Jesus and in turn Jesus tells Peter to "Get behind me Satan!" This time they do not understand any better than they did the first time but they had the good sense to be silent. Jesus himself seems to have temporarily given up on elucidating them and he too falls into silence.

With the disciples not ready to hear what Jesus has to say, they soon start whispering among themselves about their own concerns. The word Mark uses implies that the disciples did not want Jesus to overhear them as he walked ahead of them. We will soon learn why this is the case. This should have been their first clue that what they were doing wasn't right. Even in their incomprehension they knew what they were doing wasn't right, but it doesn't stop them.

Then again, does it always stop us? Our desires, things we think we need, or deserve get the better of us. Our inner emptiness and fragility get take us down dead ends. We may not commit murder but the writer of

James is on the right track when he says, **“And you covet something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly.”** Lord help us, isn't that the way of it? We don't know how to ask for the things we truly need. We often don't even know what to ask for! When we do ask we ask for the wrong things at the wrong time!

So many of these things revolve around our ego. Either we have too much and become egotistical or we have too little and try to overcompensate. Yes, we all need some self-esteem. We all need a healthy sense of self. But when it's out of whack, look out!

Jesus and the disciples finally arrive at their destination. They get settled in the house they were staying at. The disciples have put out of their minds Jesus' talk of his crucifixion. Then Jesus draws them up short, **“What were you arguing about back on the road?”**

The fat is in the fire now and the disciples know it. Can't you see the disciples shuffling their feet, eyes cast down, knowing in their heart of hearts that what they were arguing about wasn't the least bit Christ like. They know it was contrary to all Jesus had been not only teaching them but demonstrating daily in his life, in his interactions with them and others. The gospel of Mark simply says, **“But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest among them.”**

They are kicking themselves now, but God help them, that's what they were talking about. What would Jesus say? Just the day before Jesus had called Peter Satan! What would Jesus do? This is a sin pure and simple, even they know it. Perhaps this is why Jesus' response is so measured. Perhaps Jesus sees in their sense of guilt and shame a sign that they are starting to get what he has been talking about. This is not a time to berate them for

their ignorance a thick headedness. It is not a time to remind them of their shortcomings. They are all too aware of them. Jesus is never in the business of kicking a person when they are down.

Jesus sits right down where he is on the dusty floor and he calls the disciples to sit down too. They are going to have a Bible study and prayer session right then and there. No time like the present! It's too important to put off! He doesn't give them a long lecture or a lengthy sermon. He simply says to them, **"The first shall be last and the last shall be first."**

Can't you just see the disciples all sitting there with Jesus. Jesus knows he has their attention. He can even see one or two of them mouthing the words to inscribe it in their memory, **"The first shall be last and the last shall be first."** They will remember this moment for as long as they live. They might not always act on it. They may spend the rest of their lives figuring out how to apply it to their daily lives. They will undoubtedly fail repeatedly to carry it out, but they will remember, **"The first shall be last and the last shall be first."**

Then Jesus sees a child, maybe he lives in the house where they are staying, or maybe the child is a neighbor's kid come over to see how the strangers are. He or she is peaking around the corner of the room watching them. Jesus beckons the child to come over. Jesus picks up the child in his arms and set him in the midst of the disciples. Then he tells the disciples the strangest thing, **"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."**

What is going on here? The first thing we have to do is get that stain glass picture out of our minds, you know the one, the one where Jesus in all his radiant glory, with his best gentle Jesus meek and mild expression on, is

holding a small child. This is not a Bill Cosby moment, or if you are old enough to remember, an Art Linkletter, *Kids Say the Darndest Things*, moment. Jesus is not trying to enact some cute, precious moments, scene. Jesus is trying to demonstrate one of the essential characteristics of the community of faith he is trying to create, is constantly trying to create, even now. This is serious business and it has nothing to do with cuteness. It has to do with the battle the book of James talks about, saying, **“God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.”** (James 4:5b)

You children in that day were of little account. Oh, I’m sure their mothers and fathers loved them but in the giant scheme of things they were low on the totem pole. This may be hard for us to image today, but perhaps some remember a time when even children in this country were to be “seen and not heard,” when there was a big family gathering they would eat in the kitchen or at a separate table from the adults.

We might capture the essence of what Jesus is demonstrating if we substituted in our church stain glass windows an illegal alien crossing the desert wastes of Arizona, dying of thirst and suffering from heat stroke, to come and support his family in Chiapas by picking lettuce for our salads. We might place in our stain glass windows an AIDS patient dying in a hospital room, caste out by his family and friends. If we have to have a child in our stain glass window, we might place there a child dying in a refugee camp near the border of Darfur. Jesus is calling us to form a community that includes and values the lost and the least, whoever they might be.

The promise Jesus makes is an amazing one. If we do so, we will find ourselves keeping company with Jesus himself and even more importantly,God! The path to true greatness leads in directions the world is very slow

to recognize, if at all. The world will consider this foolishness. It will take us far from the “beaten paths” of commerce and renown. However, this godly path is there, if we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. God is ever beckoning those who would be truly great to take it. The book of James points the way, **“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”**

We are going to close now with another song from that great theologian and sage of Lubbock, Mac Davis, **Rodeo Clown.**

Well they paved the road to Hollywood with promises and lies
He men has beens, who once looked good and girls with empty eyes
With rhinestone cowboys and wooden Indians everywhere you turn.
Well I can write a book of the roads I took and the lessons that I learned.

I'd rather be a rodeo clown
Than a burnt out rhinestone cowboy,
In a two-bit tinsel town.
I'd rather help somebody up
Then put somebody down
I'd rather be a rodeo clown

It was 1966 when I finally hit LA
I was living on dreams and swizzle sticks,
Kind of stumbling on my way.
Well the good Lord looks after fools and drunks
And I finally found the Son.
But I'd only won the battle, Lord, the war had just begun.

I'd rather be a rodeo clown
Than a burnt out rhinestone cowboy
In a two-bit tinsel town.
I'd rather pick somebody up
Then kick them while they're down
Lord, I'd rather be a rodeo clown

Well I like to see you when you laugh,
but I love you when you cry
And I'll tear your IOU's in half if you just look me in the eye
Cause truth and love and loyalty are the only things worthwhile
I'd trade this whole damn town away for just one honest smile.

I'd rather be a rodeo clown
Than a burnt out rhinestone cowboy
In a two-bit tinsel town.
I'd rather make somebody laugh, than make somebody cry
Lord, I'd rather be a rodeo clown
I'd rather help somebody up than put somebody down
What I'd give to be a rodeo clown.
(Yodeling)

There is a lot of truth in this song. I love the line about finding Christ "But I'd only won the battle, the war has just begun." Isn't that the way of it? Those disciples long ago sitting with Jesus on the floor, reminding them that in God's scheme of things the "first shall be the last and the last first", that community with the lost and the least is the path to God, found this out. It's the same with we modern disciples. We've won some battles, been baptized, raised in the church, confirmed and still follow Christ today, to this very moment of worship, "but we've only won some battles, the war has just begun."

What is that Paul said? **"If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."** (I Cor. 3:18-19a) Let us become rodeo clowns for God! Amen!