

Christian Greatness

Mark 10:35-45

9:00 a.m. October 18, 2009

Trinity Episcopal Church, Aurora, IL

The Rev. Charles A. de Kay

May God the Father find reasons to call us, his creation, good; God the Son find us great; and God the Holy Spirit ever inspire us to be the people we were created to be. Amen.

Please be seated.

Good morning!

What is greatness? What does it mean to be "Great?" Who are the "Great Men" and the Great Women you look up to, today?

Perhaps it's easier to answer this question with some hindsight. Now, as a kid, I knew who was great. Please understand, I was not athletic. I was not coordinated. I was always one of the last picked for baseball or for soccer. It's odd thinking back that someone like me would get to meet some of his heroes from the world of sports – I was lucky enough to meet Pele. And I met Willy Mays, the Say Hey Kid. None of them, however, stands out in my memory, none compares to the man I met at the annual book convention, who was hawking his autobiography, **The Greatest: My Own Story - Muhammad Ali** and winning every kid there's heart. It was 1975. I was 12.

This was not simply a champion in the boxing ring, this was an early champion of the new media age. You remember Ali or you've seen the footage. This is the man who said with the greatest enthusiasm and conviction over and over again, "I'm the greatest."

"It's hard to be humble," Ali said, "when you're as great as I am."

The self-proclaimed poet laureate of boxing, Ali came up with such gems as:

"This is the legend of Muhammad Ali, The greatest fighter that ever will be.

He talks a great deal and brags, indeed. Of a powerful punch and blinding speed.

Ali fights great, he's got speed and endurance. If you sign to fight him, increase your insurance.

Ali's got a left, Ali's got a right; If he hits you once, you're asleep for the night."

To sum it up, he said" "I'm the king of the world, I am the greatest, I'm Muhammad Ali. I shook up the world, I am the greatest, I'm king of the world."

When I was 12, Ali was it. Forget statesmen and world leaders, astronauts or actors, artists or musicians, scientists or inventors, philosophers or religious heroes. When I was 12, Muhammad Ali was the king of the world. He was the greatest.

What, then, is greatness? Is it power? Popularity? Charisma, dazzling charm? Toughness? Wisdom? Beauty? Wealth? Being a winner? A champion who comes up from being behind - an underdog champion? Someone who does what no one has done before? Does one have to be recognized by others for it to count? Ali had most of these traits. Aren't these some of the criteria we think of, when we think about those "who would be great?"

"But it shall not be so among you," says Jesus. No, once more, the man from Nazareth turns the expectations, the values, the models they had then and that we have now -- on their heads. The world is upside down. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all." Like any good teacher or coach,

he never asks his followers to do anything he's not willing to do himself: "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

There are the ideals of the culture, "but it shall not be so among you." Being Great in Faithfulness to God asks us to turn the world right side up. We are to get our priorities straightened out and we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We put God first and others on an equal footing with ourselves. What does this look like in real life? Our Vestry crafted a new mission statement late Monday night, and it beautifully pushes us there: "Trinity Episcopal Church," it says, "celebrates meaningful worship in a historic setting and serves a diverse community with life-changing ministries." Worship and service; all leading to transformation – us and them – and we are all together.

Last week we heard from Linda Barber about our core servant ministries to the community – a site for community service and AID work with dignity and respect; that extraordinary example of inter-church cooperation, our Thursday worship and lunch program, the Sandwich Board; and the Amnesty Center, all of which together earned us the status of one of the first Centers of Jubilee Ministry in the Diocese of Chicago by the International Episcopal Church. Of these, I've become most intimately involved with the Sandwich Board congregation, a very special family, which celebrates its own Baptisms, Weddings, and sometimes even Funerals. I rejoice with Linda in these magnificent accomplishments, by our little church with a big heart for the poor, the alien, and the marginalized.

I would add all the other ways we attempt to engage the community, inviting them in or going out to meet them where they are – from Game Night to Pizza Night to the Pancake Supper, from playing softball to cleaning up the Creek that feeds into the Fox River, from Lenten Stations of the Cross to Christmas Caroling, from the Children's Service to our 1849 worship service, from the Celebrate the Centuries Dance to this afternoon's CROP Walk, and so much more. In modest one-time adventures, as well as ongoing and seasonal ministries, Trinity is reaching out in worship and in service. And, yes, they do often overlap and are intertwined in the most peculiar and fascinating ways. Along the way lives are changed forever.

What is greatness? It differs every day around here. But I can tell you it often comes in the form of a smile or a welcoming face – there's that underlying radical hospitality, again – often in the midst of significant stress. That smile or gentle welcome says to the poor, the downtrodden, the outsider, whether casual visitor or alien seeking shelter, it says that all are welcome here. It says this is a safe haven where the promises laid out our Baptismal Covenant aren't simply given lip service but are fully embodied, and perhaps none more so than those tricky, challenging promises that we're going to really try "to seek and serve Christ in all persons," and to "respect the dignity of every human being."

And not just here, within the safe confines of the hallowed walls of our home turf (these church buildings), but everywhere we gather as Trinity. The Trinity Deacons softball team, for instance, played anyone – anyone at all – who came out and wanted to play. In the end we fielded some pretty marginal players. Heavens, they even let me play!

Following the lead of the Episcopal Church, we invite you to "Come grow with us." These are not idle words. "Trinity Episcopal Church," the Vestry says, "celebrates meaningful worship in a historic setting and serves a diverse community with life-changing ministries." Here's a very real opportunity for rich growth. Grow in your spiritual journey. Grow outwards

and reach out to others. Grow up. Grow down – put down roots and become part of this wonderful, wacky, winsome family. Grow towards the light. Reflect the light you don't need to absorb. You just might find yourself becoming great in the Way, as the faith was once known, without ever really trying too hard.

It's a different kind of greatness we seek here. The joys and blessings offered along the way, like the wonder of making someone else's day or a transcendent sense of peace, are meaningful and lasting, quite unlike those ephemeral ones earned in the pilgrimage toward worldly greatness, which vanish like smoke as quickly as they're achieved.

In closing, I'd like to be fair to my childhood hero. Muhammad Ali that wily worldly king also is recorded as having said: (1) of his constant boasting "I figured that if I said enough, I would convince the world that I really was the greatest." And (2) "Maybe I was great in the ring, but outside of boxing, I'm just a brother like other people. I want to live a good life, serve God, help everybody I can. And one more thing. I'm still gonna find out who stole my bike when I was 12 years old in Louisville and I'm gonna whup him. That was a good bike."

In the name of the holy and undivided Trinity: the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.