

The Radical Rabbi Who Bucked Conventional Wisdom

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"The Yellow Christ" (1889) by Paul Gauguin

Prayer of Illumination

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds
to your wondrous love.
Speak your word to us;
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds and our hearts, to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

Do you remember this from the Tolkien books and movies "The Lord of the Rings"? The Ring of Power or as Gollum called it, "My Precious," was not just any ring. The ring had enormous power over anyone who wore it. It had the power to increase or amplify the character of the one who slipped it on their finger. The ring of power turned the human being Sméagol into Gollum—a selfish creature of the dark. Even those who would do good, such as the hobbits Bilbo or Frodo, were influenced by the ring. It pulled at them, drawing out their more sinister qualities that lurked deep in the heart—

normally hidden. The longer you wore the ring, the more these qualities became a part of you—selfishness, greed, ambition, deception, destruction.

Even disciples are not immune from the lure of the ring:

“Lord we want you to do a favor for us.”

“We want to sit at your right and left hand in your kingdom.”

James and John seized the moment to throw their hat in the ring. We want more. Jesus, we want a seat of power, to rule, to give orders, to tell others what to do, to punish, to put others in their place—we want to make our authority felt. (cough cough) All in your name of course, Jesus.

After the brother’s bold request, Jesus called the twelve together for a time-out. It was time to regather and huddle up and nip this in the bud. The very mission of Jesus was at stake.

So let’s hear now Jesus’ TED talk on leadership:

Scripture: Mark 10:35-45 (NRSV)

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” 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?” 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; 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.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 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.

But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever. Thanks be to God.*

SERMON – The Radical Rabbi Who Bucked Conventional Wisdom

When Martin Luther King Jr. preached on this passage, he famously called this hunger for power the “Drum Major Instinct” saying:



"There is deep down within all of us an instinct. It's a kind of drum major instinct—a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first. And it is something that runs the whole gamut of life... We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade..."

James and John—the sons of Zebedee, were ambitious brothers. And they were tapping into their inner-drum major, channeling their inner-peacock. Their attempt to jockey for power and jostle for privilege is cringeworthy. But we need to see it ourselves, before we write them off.

Now the disciples James and John, along with Peter, were already in the inner circle of the twelve. They got to see Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain, in the previous chapter. But they wanted more. Jesus gave the brothers the nickname "*Boanerges*," which is translated "Sons of Thunder," because they earlier wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village that rejected Jesus. Jesus rebuked not the Samaritans, but James and John, the Sons of Thunder.

The ten other disciples were, shall we say, "non-plussed" about the brothers' power grab.

- Were they ticked off because of the shameless self-interest of the brothers?
- Were they roused to jealousy because they didn't think of asking this favor earlier?
- Were they miffed that James and John might have the upper hand amongst the twelve?

"You've missed it," said Jesus. "You've got it all wrong." Can you drink of the cup that I drink? Are you able to be baptized with my baptism? "Yes, we are." And we know later...they will be. But here and now, they're thinking about glory, while Jesus is thinking about Golgotha. Here and now, James and John are thinking about self-promotion, while Jesus is thinking about suffering for others. When Jesus was lifted up and glorified—do you know who was on his right and his left? Not James or John...it was two thieves. One to Jesus' right and the other to his left—crucified. Jesus' nail-scarred hands were extended to both on the cross. That's sacrificial leadership.

Through Christ's cup of suffering and Christ's waters of tribulation, we die to ourselves and identify with Christ. We take on Christ's mission, Christ's way, Christ's responsibilities, Christ's cross. Our radical rabbi is doing something revolutionary here. He's bucking all the conventional wisdom on leadership. He's reversing the entire history of human ideas about greatness and rank and turning them on their head.

Jesus came not to BE served, but to SERVE. His life was not a benefit to himself, he was here and is here to be a benefit the world. Jesus didn't come to be fed grapes, or to order people around or to have his profile carved into a coin or a mountain. Christ didn't seek his glory, he sought the Father's glory.

Greatness does not entail reducing others to serve us, greatness rather reduces ourselves to the service of others. The heights are reached not by aspiration or competition, but by humility and service, by kneeling in prayer.

Do you want to be a great Christian? Do we want to be a great Church? Walk in Christ's humility and put the interests of others before your own. Follow Christ's path and Mold yourself into the pattern of Christ. This is a death blow to human nature and human pride. Jesus stands head and shoulders above all leaders in human history because he bowed down to serve. Jesus had not only a "do as I say" ministry but a "do as I do" ministry. The King of kings and the Lord of lords had the power to do whatever he wanted. How did he wield his power? He served others and he died for the world so that we might live for God.

Jesus' self-giving on the cross, somehow, someway opened up the way to God for us. We are set free... to serve. Jesus is calling the church today to a halftime locker room speech. Calling his modern day disciples back to who we are—IT IS NOT SO AMONG YOU. IT WILL BE DIFFERENT WITH YOU.

The Good Shepherd calls us to care for others under our care, rather than fleece them. We have the same mindset as Christ in our attitude toward individuals and our attitude toward people groups—whether they be other races or nations or creeds. It's counter-intuitive and paradoxical: The best kind of leadership, is actually followership of Christ. Your caliber of leadership is determined by how much you serve, not by being served.

Remember the stories of King Arthur and Camelot? What was so unusual about the mythical king? The round table.



King Arthur's round table was a powerful symbol that reminded the knights and King Arthur that they all had equal status. And the knights had the same calling to courage, chivalry, and service.

Peter in his first letter puts it this way: Do not lord it over the group that is in your charge, but be an example to the flock. Paul tells the Corinthians: We proclaim not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord,

and ourselves as your servants through Jesus. And John, the son of Zebedee, ultimately “got it” when he said in 1 John 3:16: He laid down his life for us; and so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. To become great, you must become a servant. To be first, you must be a slave of all. Jesus turns it all upside down and inside out. He was all about downward mobility. Jesus’ life and death turns worldly power and authority on its head.

We need a “why” and we need a “how” in life. Why we do things is important, but also how we do them is equally crucial. Jesus is not only our Who, Jesus is our Why. Jesus is our How. He is our means and our end. And we know what no human can do, Jesus, Son of Man and Son of God, does. And he does it for us.

I’d like to close with this excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.’s sermon “*The Drum Major Instinct*.” Here is the manuscript of the excerpt:

He said in substance, "Oh, I see, you want to be first. You want to be great. You want to be important. You want to be significant. Well, you ought to be. If you're going to be my disciple, you must be." But he reordered priorities. And he said, "Yes, don't give up this instinct. It's a good instinct if you use it right. (Yes) It's a good instinct if you don't distort it and pervert it. Don't give it up. Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. (Amen) I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do."

And he transformed the situation by giving a new definition of greatness. And you know how he said it? He said, "Now brethren, I can't give you greatness. And really, I can't make you first." This is what Jesus said to James and John. "You must earn it. True greatness comes not by favoritism, but by fitness. And the right hand and the left are not mine to give, they belong to those who are prepared." (Amen)

And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. (Amen) That's a new definition of greatness.

And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, (Everybody) because everybody can serve. (Amen) You don't have to have a college degree to serve. (All right) You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. (Amen) You only need a heart full of grace, (Yes, sir, Amen) a soul generated by love. (Yes) And you can be that servant."

Amen.

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