

Pentecost 17, 9.19.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

“Being a Servant of All”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Last month, the women’s and the men’s Olympic marathons were run in Sapporo on Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido. As we watched the races, we also noticed places we had been, like the old red brick Hokkaido Government Building (now a museum), as well as the expansive campus of the University of Hokkaido.

Watching these races, I also thought about the history of the city of Sapporo and its university. The University of Hokkaido was founded in 1876 by an American educator named William S. Clark. Though most Americans today have never heard of Clark, he had been hired by the Japanese government to organize Sapporo Agricultural College, which is today the University of Hokkaido. Before working in Japan, Clark had been the president of Massachusetts Agricultural College, which is today the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Though Clark was only in Japan for a brief eight months to organize the school, Clark’s name and farewell address to his students are well-known to most people in Japan today. Clark’s farewell address concluded with the words, “Boys, be ambitious,” which can be translated into Japanese as 「少年よ、大志を抱け」 (*Shōnen yo, taishi o idake*). Today, I would probably render the English as “Young people, be ambitious.”

So as I watched the marathon I was also thinking about William S. Clark’s words regarding ambition. For example to be an Olympic athlete certainly requires ambition. However, the kind of ambition that Clark was talking about is not simply about doing something for one’s self, Clark was talking about having a vision for living. Clark was talking about ambition that becomes a foundation for all of life’s goals, as well as the resilience to recover from life’s setbacks.

What is not always well known is that Clark’s words “be ambitious,” weren’t simply about self-fulfillment or advancement. Clark’s words ended with a statement of purpose: “Young people, be ambitious *for Christ*.” Though there are several versions of Clark’s farewell address, what is clear is that Clark encouraged his students to lift their sights to serving others, not simply serving themselves. One’s ambition in life should not simply end with the ambition for financial gain, self-glorification or fame. Though Clark was not a missionary, his witness to Jesus Christ left an indelible mark on Japan through his students, several of whom became well-known theologians and Christian members of the Japanese Parliament.

So as I thought about the footsteps of the runners in the Olympic marathon, I also thought about other footsteps that had walked the city of Sapporo 145 years before this year’s Olympic race - footsteps that had had ambition and vision in following Jesus Christ.

All of us are walking in the footsteps of others, of people who have mentored, taught and encouraged us – people who have taken us to church, taught us to pray, and helped us realize the inner spiritual universe that exists within each of us.

Today's gospel reading describes walking with Jesus. In the gospel reading Jesus was walking with his disciples, passing through Galilee. As the disciples walked with Jesus, he taught them, saying, "*The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.*"

Jesus again, for the second time in Mark's gospel, shared his ambition, his life's goal and work with his disciples, to undergo suffering, death and resurrection. Jesus' ambition and plan to undertake the work of the Messiah was so well defined that he could easily share it with his disciples. Yet as we know, the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying and were afraid to ask him about it. Even after first explaining his work as the Messiah (last week's gospel, Mark 8:27-38), the disciples still did not understand.

The disciples were walking with Jesus but they were not yet walking in his footsteps. The disciples were walking and arguing about their own ambitions and plans of glory. Mark says that when they came to Capernaum, Jesus asked his disciples what they were arguing about on the way. Jesus already knew what they were arguing about and their response of silence speaks volumes. The disciples knew that their argument about who was the greatest was foolish and meaningless in light of Jesus' words about suffering, death and resurrection. The disciples did not yet realize that what Jesus was describing is the selfless way of service to others.

So Jesus, knowing what they had been arguing about sat down and called his disciples saying to them, "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*" Jesus was, in a sense, settling their argument. True greatness comes only through service to others. The disciples could walk with Jesus, but only by following in his footsteps of suffering and service for others would they finally begin to understand about true greatness.

Ambition to serve others is not about trying to use people, resources and institutions to further one's own prestige and goals. Rather, greatness is not about me; it's about others. It is about asking, "How can I use my gifts and talents to serve others?" Instead of looking into the mirror on the wall and asking, "Who is the greatest of them all?" Jesus is encouraging his disciples, and us, to look outward into the world, asking, "How can I make the greatest use of my gifts for God and for my neighbor?" True greatness is always outward bound; it's never inward looking.

In order to teach this simple but profound lesson, Jesus stood a little child among them, and taking the child into his arms, said, "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*" What Jesus said is profound. A child needs care and attention in order that they might grow and mature. It was an example that

even seems today to be overly simple. Of course, children need things done for them. They need people who take time with them, accept them as they are, respecting them for who they are and who are becoming. While this example is often used to say we are all children of God, it also has a deeper meaning.

To say it in another way, Jesus is talking about serving those who, like children, are small, weak and vulnerable. By using the example of a child, Jesus was also telling his disciples they must resist the temptation to welcome the large and powerful who can help them advance their selfish ambitions for greatness.

Today's gospel should remind us of other words spoken by Jesus, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy...Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*" (Mt. 5). These are qualities we see both in children, and also in those who serve others. Today's gospel should also remind us of something else Jesus said, "*Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me*" (Mt. 25:40).

By allowing his disciples to argue about ambition and greatness, Jesus also allowed them to hear the good news that the kingdom of God is not about self-service but about serving others. This is such a profoundly world changing perspective that we still find it inspiring two millennia later.

Christians and the church need to hear the message about service to others over and over because without Jesus it is not easy. Christians and the church haven't always gotten this right. Though the early church knew what it was like to suffer under the weight of imperial Rome, the church, too, soon learned about worldly ambition. Ecclesiastical authority was wedded to imperial power and throughout history Christians have argued with the state and governments about "who is greatest of them all."

The church participated in colonialism and the spread of the global commercial enterprise that subjugated and oppressed the colonized around the world. Each of us may not have participated in this history but we are heirs to the systems and the institutions established by the colonial and commercial enterprise in which the church is privileged as one of the greatest in the world. As Christians and as a church, we need to hear over and over that to follow in the footsteps of Jesus means serving the least, the small, the vulnerable. By standing a little child in the midst of the disciples, Jesus is saying that greatness comes from caring about those who are vulnerable and little in stature.

When I taught at the Lutheran seminary in Tokyo, I was a member of the Japan Ecumenical Association. In preparation for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, for two years beginning in 2015, we had several keynote speakers who spoke about the meaning of the Reformation from their own denominational perspectives.

One of these speakers was Bishop (Paul) Kazuhiro Mori (1938-) bishop in the Archdiocese of Tokyo. After giving a textbook lecture about the medieval church's need for reformation and the correctness of Luther's rediscovery of justification by grace through faith, Bishop Mori told a personal story.

Bishop Mori recounted how, as a young priest in Rome in the 1960s, he attended worship in St. Peter's Basilica. Bishop Mori expressed his shock at seeing the Bishop of Rome carried into the congregation riding upon an ornate chair. Reflecting on this memory, Bishop Mori said that he was embarrassed to see the shepherd of the church carried in such an ostentatious display of greatness. Bishop Mori said (and I paraphrase), "I realized then and there that, one, I never wanted to be carried like that, and two, I only desired to become a servant of Christ." The bishop then talked about Martin Luther's *Freedom of a Christian* and being the servant of all. We are freed by grace to serve others. What Bishop Mori was also saying is that the church is always in need of reform. The church is always in need of repentance and a return to the discipleship of walking in the footsteps of Jesus in service to others.

So I ask the question: "What is your life's ambition?" What is the goal of your life? What is your ambition for the use your gifts and time? In the words of William S. Clark, "Be ambitious for Christ." Use your blessings to become a blessing to others.

Jesus is saying two things in today's gospel. The first is about being an individual that welcomes and serves others, and by calling together the twelve, Jesus was speaking about the earliest form of the church, telling them about being a church that welcomes and serves others.

The school supplies and notes that we bless and send in today's service are a small sign of taking seriously the need to care for others, by helping children continue to learn about the world and discover things about themselves. To be a welcoming church is about welcoming the weak and the vulnerable, the oppressed and the forgotten. We are a servant church walking in the footsteps of Jesus the servant king. To follow Christ means we are not bystanders, but active participants in the mission and ministry of Jesus to the world.

Over the next few weeks you will have the opportunity to volunteer to serve at St. Mark's. Our ministries and teams will have tables set up in the Gathering Place. Please go and check them out, and prayerfully consider how Christ is calling you to serve at St. Mark's. All of us, no matter our age, have chapter in our lives and God continues to call us to service in every chapter of our lives.

What is your ambition in life? Jesus said, "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*" What is your life's work and what will you be remembered for? Be ambitious for Christ. Be a servant of all. Follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Amen.