

Homily for February 21st 2017

In Mark's Gospel we have a passage that illustrates how the ways of Jesus are so contrary to the common understanding of true greatness. In a world where we are left with the idea that we are always needing to be in competition, and he who gets to the top wins; Jesus says it is not competition that really matters but true cooperation and self-sacrifice. However such teaching was so outside of the Apostles' frame of reference that Mark tells us:

But they did not understand.

That's a picture that can be hung in the halls of the museum of mankind. When confronted by true greatness, we simply do not see it. Here is what happened with the disciples. One day Jesus is passing through Galilee. We are told that he did not want anyone in the area to know where they were. Why is that? Because, he had something important to tell them. It was a strategic part of his plan. "The Son of Man" he explains, "is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him," now listen to what he says next, "and after three days he will rise." There it was. The whole plan laid before them. The crucifixion and the resurrection. They should have been curious. They should have asked questions. They could have seen the significance. But the best they could muster up at this crucial moment was a blank stare and confused silence. They could not understand it because it did not meet what they felt was the measure of greatness. And so instead of trying to understand Jesus they argued with each other about which of them was the greatest.

How do we grow to the point that we stop measuring people by their successes and start regarding people for their cooperative service, for their sacrifices? How do we move from a world's model which measures value in terms of wealth, fame, and power to a model which measures value in based on Jesus' teachings? What is greatness in the kingdom of God?

Let's notice that true greatness is hardly ever recognized. How can we know greatness when we see it? Jesus' teaching about his impending suffering was not something the Apostles could fathom. It was so far beyond any category that they could consider when thinking about life's meaning.

True greatness that is hardly ever recognized is on display in Mel Gibson's latest movie "Hacksaw Ridge". It tells the story of a conscientious objector or as the protagonists describes himself "a conscientious contributor". Desmond Doss is a Virginian, who because of his faith as a Seventh Day Adventist, and violence he experienced earlier in life, (he violently attacked his brother with a brick when a pre-teen and broke up a violent altercation between his parents, where he wrested a gun from his father and was very close to using it on his paternal progenitor).

Because of this, he refuses to carry a rifle and kill the Japanese enemy. However he insists on serving his country as a combat medic who does not carry a gun. For three days in May 1945 we see Desmond in the heart of the battle, as the Americans take this key ridge in Japan "Hacksaw". He clearly shows what it is to suffer in the service of others. Many in his unit are severely injured in the battle and Desmond ingeniously rigs up a rope pulley whereby he is able to lower them off the ridge to safety.

Earlier in the film Desmond is ridiculed by the barrack sergeant and his fellow recruits because of his principled and courageous decision not to carry a weapon. By the time we get to the movies' end we see in Desmond the kind of greatness taught by Jesus..... One who was willing to suffer and lay down his life for his fellow soldiers.

For his cooperative service he was the first American Soldier to be awarded the Medal of Freedom without having fired a shot.

To serve is to truly will the good of the other as other. To be preoccupied with the comparison of who is the greatest is to will others to think of my good and to serve me.

The way Jesus teaches is the harder way but it is also the way of discovery to what it really means to be great. No life has more fully represented the way of self-giving love than that of Jesus. Then when movies like Hacksaw Ridge embody this principled way of living it is easy to identify in a character like Desmond Doss as an authentic human being who in joining with his master Jesus came not to be served but to serve.

This evening many of you here are attending the Beloved Series, a beautifully crafted six part series on the sacramental meaning of Marriage. Any marriage that will be a true communion is not one of competition but of cooperative service. Although you do not need to put your lives on the line in the way Desmond Doss did for his unit, true greatness in marriage grows out of that willingness to genuinely serve your beloved and lay your life down for him or her. This means laying down your ego and pride. It means learning the way of transparency and humility. It requires patience and forgiveness. Such a marriage will not only last but become ever more meaningful because such a marriage is enacting the principle teaching of Jesus.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and the servant of all.”

Desmond Doss embodied this teaching and all vital marriages are shaped by this same principle.