

ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Spirit That Will Make Us Great

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 15, 2016

The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday—Based on Ezekiel 37: 1-10, Mark 10: 35-45, and Acts 2: 14-21

Proposition: I propose to show that “true greatness” is being open to the Spirit of God’s love flowing in service for creating a beloved community of justice, peace and compassion; to the end that the hearers will

- 1) Receive a heightened awareness of the appeal of greatness
- 2) Reach an enlightened understanding of true greatness
- 3) Commit themselves to a Spirit-empowered life of service

Introductory Words

I am delighted to have yet another opportunity to preach from the pulpit of St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church. I used to preach for your weekday Lenten series during the tenure of The Reverend Tom Bowers. I am especially glad to be invited on Pentecost Sunday. May I risk acknowledging that I feel qualified to take on this task because, though UCC and Baptist, I am a Pentecostal Preacher by background. Pentecost was the highest patronal feast day in my home church in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Nevertheless, there are two disqualifying disclaimers regarding my suitability for this assignment that I ought to admit. First, as a young minister I did not meet one of the requirements for being an authentic Pentecostal preacher — nobody had ever heard me speak in unknown tongues which was considered to be evidence that one was filled with the Spirit. But I pressed on anyway to achieve a pretty good preaching reputation. I finally was honored with an invitation to preach on Pentecost Sunday at the Washington Cathedral in the Nation’s capital. I tried my best to bring some Pentecostal enthusiasm to that rather solemn assembly, but the Rose Window of the Cathedral spoke to me and said, “Slow down, Jim, you’re not going to get much rousement going in here.” But I must have done all right because at the end of the service a gentleman came by to shake my hand and said, “I want you to know that was the most deeply moving religious experience I’ve had in my life.” By the grace of God I hope I’ll do ok today.

As we approach the half-way mark on our current Presidential Election year, we have been hearing a lot about “greatness.” It is very obvious that many of our fellow citizens would like to see some changes in this nation that will make us great again. If the truth be known, all of us — Democrats, Republicans and Independents, have a certain attraction to greatness. Promise us greatness and you capture our attention. Even if we are not likely to achieve greatness personally, at least, we want to be identified with it, or know someone who is, or desire to be recognized as a supporter of great causes. On a personal note, I may not be great but some of my best friends are. I’ve been around some great people. I hosted Nelson Mandela when I was the Senior Minister at the Riverside Church. The Dalai Lama gave me a silk stole when he visited there. I got this close to Pope Francis when we welcomed him at the World Trade Center Tower. Archbishop Tutu and I are friends. I’ve talked with Muhammad Ali, who claimed to be the greatest. And I spoke from the platform, the same night at the National Democratic Convention in Boston in 2004, when, then Senator Barack Obama spoke. You didn’t see me on TV because my speech was completed long before prime time. And one last thing, I have the greatest wife in the world. Stand up, Bettye.

Now I assume each of you has identification with greatness as well. It’s only fair to give you the opportunity to say something about that distinction — who you are, where you’re from, what you do, who you know, or some

unique specialty most people don't know about you. Go on and share with the person sitting next to you. Let them know how blessed they are to be in the presence of one for whom greatness is not a total stranger. After your exchange of distinctiveness, I want to say a serious word about greatness. What it is not, what it is and how we may achieve it personally and as a nation.

Although I did a little bragging about my exposure to greatness I am very sensitive to claims or promises of greatness. It goes back to my childhood in the Bible Belt. The story was told about King Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great. It seemed like a horror story to my young mind. One day he delivered a public address to his people, and this is what happened: The people kept shouting "The voice of a god and not of a mortal." And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms and died. Acts 12: 20-23 (NRSV). KJV-"And he was eaten of worms and gave up the ghost," verse 23. Since hearing that story I have been superstitious of claims of greatness. I am always listening when there is talk of greatness.

There is another episode in the Bible from Mark's Gospel 10: 35-45 which speaks a powerful word about the longing for greatness. James and John, two of the disciples of Jesus, asked Jesus to promise to them a seat at his right hand and his left hand. The other disciples were livid. When they heard it they lashed out at them in anger. Jesus overheard the exchange and this is what he said to them: Mark 10: 42-45, "You know 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."

That's how I understand "true greatness!"

There is great fame and popularity
great wealth and power
great influence and impact
great gifts and competence
even international recognition.

But according to the two persons whose greatness has most powerfully impacted my life and my understanding, I must let you know that "true greatness is being open to the Spirit of God's love flowing in service for the creating of a beloved community of justice peace and compassion." Yes, we yearn for greatness, but not just any kind of notoriety, but true greatness which only God's spirit of love can generate and sustain through the course of our lives. One of the great mentors of my spirit described the other leader of my soul this way:

I know a man, and I just want to talk about him a minute, and maybe you will discover who I'm talking about as I go down the way, because he was a great one. And he just went about serving. He was born in an obscure village, the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in still another obscure village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old. Then for three years, he just got on his feet, and he was an itinerant preacher. And then he went about doing some things. He didn't have much. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the usual things that the world would associate with greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

He was thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. They called him a rabble-rouser. They called him a troublemaker. They said he was an agitator. He practiced civil disobedience; he broke injunctions. And so he was turned over to his enemies, and went through the mockery of a trial. And the irony of it all is that his friends turned him over to them. One of his closest friends denied him. Another of his friends turned him over to his enemies. And while he was dying, the people who killed him gambled for his clothing, the only possession that he had in the world. When he was dead, he was buried in a borrowed tomb, through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today he stands as the most influential figure that ever entered human history. All of the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one solitary life. His name may be a familiar one. But today I can hear them talking about him. Every now and then somebody says, "He's king of kings." And again I can hear somebody saying, "He's lord of lords." Somewhere else I can hear somebody saying, "In Christ there is no east nor west." And they go on to talk about . . . "In him there's no north and south, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide world." He didn't have anything, He just went around serving, and doing good.

This morning, you can be on his right hand and his left hand if you serve. It's the only way in.

That's how I understand "true greatness."

The person who spoke of Jesus with these words did so while he was preaching on February 4, 1968, two months before his assassination. The title of the sermon is existentially close to me because I now serve as The National Minister of the Drum Major Institute, which Dr. Martin Luther King founded along with Harry Wachtel of New York City. In that sermon he had made the case that all of us have the same basic desire for recognition, for importance, that same desire for attention, that same desire to be first. He called it the drum major instinct. He first applied it to our personal aspirations, reminding us of how easy it can be perverted and lead to reprehensible behavior. Then he went on to say how this instinct can affect nations. This is what he said about our beloved country:

But this is where we are drifting, and we are drifting there, because nations are caught up with the drum major instinct. I must be first. I must be supreme. Our nation must rule the world. And I am sad to say that the nation in which we live is the supreme culprit. And I'm going to continue to say it to America, because I love this country too much to see the drift that it has taken.

He ended his sermon in foreboding anticipation of his impending death. These words were echoed at his funeral.

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards, that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try, in my life, to clothe those that were naked. I want you to say, on that day, that I did try, in my life, to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.

Now that's what I understand about true greatness. May I be honest with you, if that is what greatness is I would like to aspire toward being like that. When I sing, "Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart," I really mean it.

When I think about the kind of values I want to promote, Dr. King's message is in my mind and even finds its

way into my mouth as was so powerfully the case with this sermon.

What is your deepest response to this message? Does this definition of greatness as service of others, does it resonate with your spirit? Are you wondering who could help us be like that?

If you are sincerely asking that question, I believe Jesus and Dr. King would have a word to say to us about how this might happen to us and to our nation — becoming great.

Jesus told his disciples, “greater things than what I’ve done, you shall do, because I go to the one who sent me.” Then he sent them to Jerusalem to wait for the gift of the Spirit which would give them power to embody the greatness of divine love.

As the scriptures remind us today, the Spirit of power came at Pentecost and it activated divine energy within them. Love not only flowed from their lips but their lives as well. They started to share their space, their prayers, their resources until a new community of jubilee justice began to emerge. People began to marvel at the greatness of their love for one another.

That’s the Pentecost I’m talking about when I say

The Spirit is the key to community
Where love and justice flow like streams
Where the people work together for the common good
To make our cities safe for dreams

The Spirit sets us free from anxiety
About our neighbors far and near
When we learn to welcome strangers greeting them as friends
No longer are we bound in fear

The Spirit sees the world as a neighborhood
The Spirit yearns for war to cease
So the Spirit forms a circle of freedom loving friends
To claim the world for joy and peace

Finally, what does Dr. King have to say on this Pentecost Sunday that could reveal the secret to our turning toward the greatness that is our calling as a nation? Let me put it this way. One night, February 10, 1958, I went with my mother to hear Dr. King at the Needham Broughton High School in Raleigh, North Carolina. I wasn’t ware of it but his spirit touched my spirit. Something in me said, “I want to serve the cause of justice, peace and compassion.” It was while preparing this sermon that for the first time I was reminded that the Montgomery Bus Boycott took place in 1955 and that I accepted the call to ministry in 1956 — the next year. I don’t know the direct connection but I suspect my mother knew.

When I left for seminary in September 1958, my mother put two books in my suitcase — one was the King James Version of the Bible, and the other — was *Stride Toward Freedom* by Dr. King. As I read it, I came across a passage, which is the best hope for greatness in America or anywhere else in the world. He said, “The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating force which moves through history,” Our nation needs a Great Spiritual/Moral Awakening. That’s how we and our nation will find true greatness again, or maybe for the first time.

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