

“Authority: Won or Bestowed?”

II Corinthians 10:12-18; Mark 10:35-45

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio

March 12, 2017 – 2nd Sunday in Lent - Rev. Ronald Botts

Some years back a small town in Iowa found itself in quite a dilemma. This village was not unlike hundreds of others, a nice enough place but struggling economically. People liked it there.

As in most places there was one family that was genuinely wealthy. One day the patriarch decided to make his fellow citizens an offer, one which they surely could not refuse. Here was his proposal: he would provide the town with a new library, a new health care facility, park, city hall, and school—and he would do it all for free.

To this rural community it was a magnificent offer. No public money would have to be raised or used in construction. The only string attached, a minor one in the donor's eyes, was to rename the town... after him. Certainly a bit of personal appreciation was not too much to ask, considering what would be gained.

Well, the old man's offer stirred debate as no other issue ever had. One side said "yes," accept the gift. It is still the same town no matter what it's called. This new construction would mean jobs and progress. These new public works were definitely needed and no tax money would be required. Take the offer.

The other side was just as vocal. It wasn't that the new buildings weren't needed. It wasn't that they were against philanthropic gifts. It wasn't that they didn't want an improved quality of life. What bothered them was that accepting the offer meant losing their historical identity. The town's name would simply be bought and changed, provided they were willing to sell. Turn it down.

After much anguish and talk—probably even a few prayers—the townspeople finally came to a decision. They would be fools to decline the generous offer, but decline it they did. They decided their integrity was worth more than the proposed gifts. They would just have to get along with what they had a little longer or find another way to accomplish it.

After all was said and done, in time the rich man ended up giving his hometown everything he had originally proposed but this time with no strings attached. A grateful town accepted the offer, and then voluntarily named each building after its donor.

Our Scripture today tells of two brothers who come to Jesus with a rather unusual request. "Teacher," said the disciples James and John, "There is something we want you to do for us. When you sit on your throne in the glorious Kingdom, we want you to let us sit with you, one at your right and one at your left."

To understand what they were asking we need to know a bit about ancient protocol. Custom dictated that, in any official gathering, the seats around a table or room were to be assigned

according to rank. Place equated with power. So the two most coveted positions would naturally be those immediately flanking the monarch—that is, at his right and left hands.

It was with this understanding that the two brothers framed their request to Jesus. They didn't aspire to primacy, for that was Christ's place; but clearly they wished to occupy the next higher rank. Among the disciples, then, they sought to be first among equals.

So what motivated them to ask for this? We're not told. Maybe it was the need for notoriety or a desire for influence and power. Perhaps they just wanted some recognition that all their time and effort was not being poured out in vain. Whatever the motive, to ask such a question is a very human thing to do.

Social scientists tell us that one of the strongest fantasies that people have is that of fame. Television, the movies, magazines, newspapers, sports, politics, advertising—all thrive on fame and the personalities of the famous. There seems to be an inner aspiration in most everyone that longs for identification and reward. For every contestant on *American Idol*, there were probably thousands who aspired to be.

Some, who know they will never become famous on their own merits, have found other ways of approaching it. Groupies are probably the prime example. We might call this "fame by osmosis." The theory seems to be that, if you get close enough to status people, some of it rubs off on you. It happens in the entertainment world. It happens in the political world. Why it even happens in the workplace and at school, anywhere that some people enjoy a measure of success and prominence.

Interestingly, those who have achieved fame are often not as enamored of it as we might expect. A comedian once defined a celebrity as "a person who works hard all his life to become known, then wears dark glasses to avoid being recognized."

Nonetheless, fame is a strong motivator, and there are always people waiting in the wings to get their turn. They'll look for their chance even if the consequences aren't fully positive. How much crime, for example, is inspired by this deep-seated drive to be known? If you can't get it one way, you may have to turn to another. To some, infamy is better than no notice at all.

We bolster up this desire for fame with an elaborate set of rituals—from the Academy Awards to the FBI's ten most wanted. And we have our high priests of fame on *Inside Edition* and on late-night programs who merchandise the famous. TV and the tabloids are prominent channels for recognition.

So, perhaps, it isn't so hard to understand the actions of James and John in seeking Jesus' favor. He handled their question well and wisely, and, in so doing, he made an important distinction between fame and honor. They aren't interchangeable terms because while fame can be achieved, honor can only be bestowed. Honor comes from emptying oneself rather than trying to inflate the ego.

Jesus spelled it out to the brothers in terms of sacrifice—even unto death—as he himself was prepared to do. He told them they didn't realize what they were asking. Honor in this instance would only come through "drinking the cup" that he was to drink and by becoming a willing servant to others.

We can see the truth in this because most anyone can achieve a certain degree of fame if driven enough, but honor comes only to the worthy. Honor is elusive: the harder one attempts to achieve it, the farther away it becomes. History shows that some people gain high public awareness for a while, only to drop out of the spotlight almost as quickly.

Agnes Bojaxhiu was born in 1910 in Yugoslavia. As a young girl she was sensitive and pious, but not unlike many other of her classmates. At the age of eighteen she made the decision to apply for admission to the Sisters of Our Lady of Loretto in Calcutta.

Following nine years of training and education, she made her vows and then taught for several years in the school attached to the convent. During this time, however, something troubled her and challenged the relative comfort she found in educating the daughters of the rich.

Agnes could not block out the voices of poverty ringing in her ears from beyond the cloister, hands stretching out by the thousands. The groans of the destitute reached her so loudly that she could not close them out. The teeming life around her was compelling a response. So after a great inner struggle, she determined she must become a worker for the poor.

Agnes labored for some time in relative obscurity, even while gathering other nuns around her who were called—as she—to the poorest of the poor. Her dedication gave new hope to those in hopeless situations. She not only extended care to the neediest, but she gave them love and dignity and understanding.

After many years people began to recognize the life-changing nature of her mission. Much later she was selected to receive a prize, the Nobel prize, in recognition of her witness and it was presented to her under her religious name: Mother Theresa. She was honored by this award—not because she sought it—but because it sought her out. Her goal was never to achieve high recognition, only to quietly carry out the work which she felt God wanted her to do.

When the other disciples heard of the request made by John and James they became indignant, perhaps because of its inappropriateness, perhaps because they had been beaten out in posing the question first.

So Jesus called them all together and said, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, he must be the slave of all."

Here Jesus turned the normal way of the world upside down. Power is usually understood in terms of a pyramid where, the farther you move up, the fewer people on your level and even less above you. The top positions are those of highest authority and the behavior of the elite makes it clear who is in charge, who has the rank, who has the power.

The new world Jesus ushered in is really a world within a world. In it authority is not won or inherited, but bestowed on those who are found deserving. Here the traditional status categories no longer apply.

Our text for today addresses the very basic questions of power and authority, of service and recognition, of honor and fame—and it challenges our normal understanding of each. We learn that a disciple of Christ is not one who wants to be regarded as good, but is good because he or she discounts outer recognition in serving others. The servant church is not one which saves up its resources and builds great, empty buildings, but rather pours out what it has for the needs of humanity and to God's glory.

Today's text tells us that those who end up being invited to sit near Jesus will not be there through their own request, but because Christ has made a place for them. And the honored will probably be the most surprised of all when the invitation comes.