

“Outrageous Ambition”
September 20, 2009

James 3:13-4.3
Mark 9:30-37

I have a friend I’ll call “Kate,” who lives in the East Bay. “Kate” and I met in law school, and that history may be part of why it seems to have been hard for Kate to get used to me with a “Rev.” in front of my name. Rev. Nancy and the Nancy I was in law school are not exactly the same person, so I can understand that getting comfortable with the minister me has not always been easy.

For Kate, there’s the additional stumbling block that comes from her being an ex-Catholic who wants nothing to do with the church. Sometimes “the church” that she doesn’t want anything to do with seems to be the Catholic Church, but, at other times, it’s any church at all.

So Kate wonders how in the world I got into this ministry biz, and she remains wary and ready to be sarcastic about anything churchy. But even though I know those things about Kate, something that happened when she was visiting Chey and me a while back still took me by surprise and got under my skin.

That afternoon, we all took a hike up the Overlook Trail. When we came to a spot on the trail with a good view of this church, I stopped and pointed it out with some real pride. Then one of us took note of the size of the cupola (or *lack* of size) on the top of the sanctuary, and I said, jokingly, “Yeah, it’s probably the shortest steeple in town.” Not missing a beat, Kate responded, “Oh. I bet that’s what ministers do when they get together. They sit around, and, instead of comparing the size of their [intimate body parts – Kate used another word], they compare the size of their steeples to see who’s got the biggest one.”

Now, I’m no prude, and I’ve seen enough movies made in the last 20 years to have heard the word Kate used and many, many other words you won’t hear me use in this pulpit. But, still, her more-or-less friendly ribbing got to me. It bothered me, and not just because it seemed a little cruder than it needed to be. It bothered me because there was at least a grain of truth in it.

And, lo and behold, this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Mark comes along with the reminder that the grain of truth in Kate’s joke is as old as the hills. Mark tells us that, nearly two thousand years ago, Jesus’ disciples were already arguing about who was the greatest.

Now, they probably weren’t arguing about who was the greatest based on the size of their steeples. Whatever they were saying to one another as they were arguing about who was the greatest, it does seem as though the disciples were bragging, boasting about being the greatest, because when Jesus asks what they were arguing about, they don’t answer him. They don’t say a word. They act as if they’re ashamed. They act like they’ve just been busted, found once again to be disciples who don’t understand Jesus’ message of service and humility.

So the grain of truth in Kate’s joke is that Jesus’ disciples, from the very beginning until this very moment, don’t get it. The grain of truth is that despite the clarity of Jesus’ message that love and service are central to our calling as human beings,

his disciples still get swept up in argument and ambition and posturing to be the “greatest,” not in love and service, but in numbers and reputation and political clout.

On the specifics, Kate’s wrong. Ministers don’t sit around and compare steeple sizes to see who’s the greatest, at least not in my experience, but what can and does happen is more subtle and more insidious. When we gather, there can be an undercurrent of competition and what James in this morning’s first reading calls selfish ambition. Instead of talking about what the Spirit is doing in the churches we serve, we can fall into talking about what *we* are doing, about *our* successes, *our* ministries. If congregational giving is up and our budgets are healthy, we can act if that’s the result of our efforts, not the result of God’s movement within the church. If we’re serving a small congregation, we may subtly tell ourselves and our colleagues that it’s just a stepping stone to a larger, “greater” church. If we’re serving a large congregation, we may subtly tell ourselves and others that we’ve made it, unlike our colleagues who are serving small churches.

Unfortunately, this ego-driven, distorted sense of what it means to be greatest among the disciples isn’t limited to clergy. Some churches and church members can become convinced that they are “the greatest” for the same misguided reasons clergy do: how big the church or its budget is; how influential the church is within its community or its denomination.

In more fundamentalist churches, this distortion of Jesus’ message, this selfish ambition can lead a congregation to conclude that it is the greatest because it’s more faithful to the literal word of the Bible; because it’s more righteous in its beliefs and actions; because it’s untainted by the ideas of other religions or of science.

And in progressive Christian churches like this one, our vulnerability to this distortion, this selfish ambition, can take the form of thinking we’re the greatest because we’re the most open-minded, the least bound by tradition, and the most interfaith. Within our denomination, the United Church of Christ, we have a special vulnerability to believing we’re the greatest when we’re political and social activists, when our congregations are the most racially and socially diverse, when we’re the most “hip” and the most unlike those other, judgmental, more narrow-minded churches.

But Jesus offers a different vision of what it means to be the greatest. Jesus, being Jesus, turns things on their head and explains that being first, being great, isn’t about getting ahead. It’s not about getting ahead to have the biggest bank account or the biggest church. It’s not about getting ahead by having the longest checklist of personal or congregational accomplishments. It’s not about getting ahead by wielding the most power in our families, our churches, our communities, or our world.

No, in the vision Jesus offers of what it is to be first, to be great, there’s no “getting ahead” at all. Instead, in this vision, greatness comes in and through service. In the words of our bulletin cover this morning, greatness comes through being first in caring.

But even here we’re on tricky ground. It’s all too easy to take that vision of love and service and still have our own egos front and center. The desire to be, as Jesus said, “last of all and servant of all” can still be rooted, not in love, but in the selfish ambition James warns against in his letter. The desire to be the greatest servant can actually be little more than the desire to look good, to get praise and congratulations, and to earn brownie points in heaven.

But there's a different kind of ambition we can have. I think of it as *outrageous* ambition. In and through Jesus, God calls us to have the audacity to join in the Spirit's work of loving and healing the world. In and through Jesus, God calls us to have the outrageous ambition to be a part of the Spirit's unending work of justice and blessing in a broken, wounded world.

So what's the difference between selfish and outrageous ambition? How can we tell when we're rooted in the outrageousness and audacity God calls us to, instead of being rooted in selfishness?

Well, the first part of the answer to those questions is that we'll never be able to be 100% sure. The impulse to act in our self-interest is in our DNA, quite literally, so we need to make peace with the likelihood that there will always be at least some selfish ambition mixed in with our outrageous ambition. What we can aim for and what God has put before us to try to do ... is for that outrageous ambition – to love and serve – grow and grow and grow, so that it overshadows whatever remains of our selfish ambitions.

That still leaves us with needing to know *how* we can nurture that outrageous ambition and *how* we can know when it's at the root of our actions and our lives. Nurturing that kind of ambition is a *lifelong* project that countless Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and many, many others have been exploring for thousands of years. Nurturing that ambition by learning to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves, is a *never-ending* journey of faith.

Life-long and never-ending though it may be, I'd like to offer two guideposts for our work of becoming outrageously ambitious as people of love and service. The two guideposts are praying and pointing.

First, praying. From the time we're born, we are bombarded with messages about who and how we should be. Some of the messages are rooted in love and hope for us. Some of the messages are rooted in the motive to make a profit, in the self-interest of others, and in the human drive to control the environment and everyone in it. In the midst of all these messages, many of which we internalize over time, we need a practice that allows those messages to recede, so that we can hear the voice of God whispering in our own hearts.

If we never slow down, if we never develop a practice that makes it possible to let the swirl of thoughts, opinions, fears, judgments, and gibberish in our heads recede into the background ... we may never have a chance to hear what the Spirit has to say about who we truly are and about what we are called to do. In prayer – true prayer, which can come in so many different forms – we can come to know who we are and who we are *called* to become. Over time, with an active prayer life, we can encounter the very presence of God within us and can let the Spirit teach us how to discern when our ambitions are selfish and when they are ambitions of love and service.

So that's guidepost of praying. The guidepost of pointing is simple. To test whether what we're doing is rooted in selfish ambition or Spirit-led outrageous ambition, we can listen to what we say and what we want to say about what we're doing. If what we say about our lives or about our church points to us – our abilities, our hard work, our creativity – there's a darn good chance we're ego- and not Spirit-driven. But if what we say and what we think about ourselves and our church points to God and what God makes possible, we may just be on the path of faithful lives and outrageous ambition.

Listen to the difference. Imagine someone saying, “This is great. Look at all we’ve been able to do in the church. We have,” say, “a new sound system, a new free lunch program, a new Sunday School room, and 20 new members.” And then imagine someone else saying, “What an amazing thing we get to be part of. We didn’t know where the money was going to come from or how we would get enough volunteers, but we’ve been able to start an after-school tutoring program or a free lunch ministry or a Friday night centering prayer group. The Spirit is moving through here in ways we hadn’t expected.”

When we imagine what we’d like to do in our lives and in our church ... when we think about what we’re already doing ... do we point to ourselves and what *we’re* able to do, or do we point the Spirit and what we’re able to be a *part* of? Do we want people to thank and appreciate *us*, or do we want people to join us in discovering the utter joy that comes from being a part of God’s work in the world?

Using the guideposts of praying and pointing, I invite you to discover your ambitions for your life and for this church. Allow yourselves to dream big, to envision outrageous ministries of service and joy. And then let yourselves discover that you have opened yourselves to the healing, transformative Spirit who wants to love and serve the world through you.

Amen.

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