

The Downward Spiral of Success

Mark 10:32-45

Among the many uncounted people who follow Jesus in the Bible, there are twelve whom Jesus chooses to be his appointed disciples. And among these twelve, there are three who are especially close to Jesus: Simon Peter, James and John. Some have called them Jesus' three closest friends. I wonder if it might be more accurate to call them the original three stooges.

Let's review.

With the rest of the disciples, these three have witnessed Jesus teach with authority, cast out countless demons, heal people with all sorts of diseases, and escape every verbal trap the most intelligent men in the nation have set for him to try to make him look foolish. They have seen him still storms, walk on water, feed thousands with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. The blind have been made to see and the deaf to hear.

Then there are the special events only these three have been privileged to witness: a little girl who had died has been brought back to life; and, the amazing event on the mountain where Jesus is transfigured and they see him speaking with Moses and Elijah.

Just how much do you need to see, how much teaching do you need to hear before it begins to sink in? Still, the first time Jesus tells his disciples that he will be killed and after three days rise, Peter takes him aside and does not say, "Jesus, I think I see where you're going with this. It's all beginning to make sense to me." No, Peter scolds him. This time, Jesus tries to explain that he is about to be arrested, mocked, spit on, flogged, and killed, and then three days later he will rise. James and John respond by asking him if they can have the best seats in the house when Jesus enters his glory, as though Jesus has just told them he got a VIP box for the World Series and they want to know if they can sit beside him.

And these are Jesus' closest friends?

Of course, when the other ten disciples hear about it, they are indignant. Why? Most likely, this is not righteous indignation; they're angry because James and John beat them to the punch.

So, Jesus gives them a lesson in true greatness. *"You know that 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."*

Mark's gospel seems to go out of its way to make Jesus' followers look like buffoons, and, it seems that the closer they are to Jesus, the less they understand what Jesus is about. Our temptation is to shake our heads and chuckle at the thickness of these guys, but that's not why Mark makes such a point of it. Mark is not making fun of James and John here, or Peter elsewhere, or the twelve still other places. If Mark's aim isn't comic relief, why does he go out of his way to emphasize the inability of Jesus' closest followers to grasp Jesus' message? I mean, Mark could just as easily have played down this little embarrassing characteristic. He could have glossed over it, but he doesn't. Why?

I'm convinced Mark highlights, rather than playing down, the disciples' total inability to understand Jesus because he saw the same thing happening among the early Christians to whom he was writing. They *were* Christians, believers, they called Jesus Lord, but there was a lot they weren't getting, a lot they did not understand. They weren't like the Pharisees and scribes, or the Romans, for whom Jesus was an enemy, a threat that had to be dealt with. They believed, like the original disciples, but they weren't always getting the point, the message, of Jesus' teachings. Mark was trying to get the early church to see themselves in Jesus' thick-headed disciples, to realize they were really looking in the mirror.

And, in that sense, the early Christians were very much like you and me. I think you and I are to look at the clueless disciples as though we are looking in a mirror, as well, because there is a lot you and I do not really get, either, especially this idea of what I call the downward spiral of success, of true greatness.

Jesus says to James and John, to the early church, and to you and me, "You want to be great? You want to be somebody in my kingdom? Okay, let me tell you what you need to do. This world thinks people with wealth and power are great. But not us. In my kingdom, if you want to be great, become the least important person in the room – the one who makes sure everyone else is taken care of. You want to be somebody? Become a nobody that nobody tries to impress. You want to be first? Move to the back of the line...let everyone else cut in front of you. You want to be my right and left hand men? Join

me in slavery. Ambition is good. Wanting to be great is fine. Here's how you do it: become everyone else's servant."

We think becoming a success is like climbing a ladder. Each step up the ladder brings a little more recognition, a little more reward, and if you've got the right stuff, you climb to the top and become the greatest.

Jesus modeled a different kind of success, a different kind of greatness. He showed us that success in the kingdom of God is a downward spiral, not an upward ladder. Jesus started out at the top. He was in heaven. As Paul puts in Philippians, chapter two, Jesus was in very nature, God. He was at the top. But he did not consider being God the thing he was to do, so he went from being God to being a man.

That's the first downward spiral: from heaven to earth, from God to man.

But, he doesn't become a great human, either, in the sense we normally think of. No wealth, no fame, no power. The Jews all thought, even Jesus' disciples all thought, the Messiah would be a charismatic, powerful figure, like King David had been, who would rally the troops, overthrow the Romans, and regain independence and wealth and respect for Israel. Instead, Jesus becomes a wandering rabbi. No palaces, no armies, no chariots. He came to serve, not to be served. He came as a servant.

Downward spiral number two.

But that's not all, either. This God/man/servant then humbled himself and became obedient unto death. He offers himself to die for people who should have been dying for him. But he didn't just die, he died on a cross. This God/man/servant died as a common criminal. They killed him like they killed common criminals, low-lives, thugs.

And that is our model of success. A downward spiral from heaven to earth,

From God to human,

From powerful to powerless,

From throne to cross,

God hanging between two thieves.

Jesus tells James and John, and you and me, if you want to be my right and left hand men and women, you've got to be willing to be the men hanging on those crosses on my right and on my left. Become great not by climbing any ladder of success, but by spiraling down, drawing less attention to yourself, becoming one of the least of these, the foot-washer, the outcast lover, the visitor of the sick, the comforter of the shut-in, the feeder of the hungry.

I read something this week in preparation for this sermon that put this all into clear focus for me. James and John come to Jesus asking to have the seats of glory on his right and left hand when he comes into his kingdom. Jesus answers that he cannot promise those seats to them, because those seats have already been reserved for those "for whom they have been prepared."

Who do you think will sit in those most choice seats at Jesus' left and right? Though we do not know their names, this much is certain, those "seats of glory are 'prepared' for those to whom such a request would not even occur;" for those who are so selflessly involved in serving others that they would never dream of asking for them.¹

Amen.

¹ Bringle, Mary Louise. 2009 Lectionary Homiletics.
<http://www.goodpreacher.com/journalread.php?id=1159>