

# A HEALTHY AMBITION

MARK 10:35-45

LENT 5-B -- MARCH 25, 2018

Oliver Cromwell was a very powerful military and political leader in England in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. One day an artist was commissioned to paint his portrait. Because Oliver Cromwell was afflicted with some nasty-looking warts upon his face, however, that professional artist thought it only wise and prudent, to omit every single wart in his rendering of Oliver Cromwell's face upon the canvas! But wouldn't you know it! When Oliver Cromwell saw the artist's finished product, he objected; demanding: "Take it away and paint me again, but this time, warts and all!"

Friends, one thing that always catches my attention in the Bible is the high degree of integrity—with which the Biblical writers always paint for us—the portraits of the many people who fill its pages! They present these people to us warts and all! -- And true to form, therefore once again, St Mark does not admit this less than flattering episode that occurred one day in the lives of Jesus' two disciples James and John; the sons of Zebedee who were not property brothers—but commercial fishing brothers!

It's not without importance, however, that in the verses immediately preceding our Gospel lesson today that St. Mark has just shared with us the **THIRD TIME THAT OUR LORD JESUS HAS PREDICTED HIS OWN SUFFERING AND CRUCIFIXION AND PROMISE TO RISE FROM THE DEAD AGAIN, THREE DAYS LATER (Mark 10:32-34)!**

And yet it seems to us, that in their callousness, all of Jesus' 12 disciples remain completely unmoved because of our what our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has just shared with them! There were times when those first 12 disciples could choose to be selective in their hearing of Christ's Word even as you and I are, at times, still today! Not even pausing to reflect on what Jesus has just shared with them—these two brothers—approach Jesus with their **OPEN-ENDED REQUEST: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask you" (v. 35)!**

But please note: Jesus didn't reply to these brothers by saying: "Okay, whatever you want—just name it—the sky's the limit!" Instead our Lord asked them pointblank: "*What do you want me to do for you" (v. 36)!* And they said to him, "*Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory!" (v. 37)!*

In the words—they were saying to Jesus—that when the Romans were finally overpowered, conquered, defeated and run completely out of their Jewish nation—and Jesus **WOULD HOPEFULLY BE RESIDING, BY THIS TIME, IN HIS ROYAL PALACE IN JERUSALEM—THAT WHEN IT CAME TIME FOR STATE DINNERS—THAT THEY WANTED JESUS TO RESERVE FOR THEM HIS BEST SEATS IN THE HOUSE!**

What could have possibly made them so bold? Well, it had to be their blatant ambition! Maybe their ambition was kindled because Jesus, upon two previous occasions had made them an integral part of his inner circle, so they began doing what St. Paul cautions every one of us against doing in Romans 12:3, where he writes: "*For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.*—they were suddenly thinking of

themselves more highly than they ought to have thought about themselves, without sober judgment, as the grace of God had been apportioned to each of them!

In Mark 5:37, we are reminded how Jesus chose Peter, James and John to accompany him into the room of Jairus' daughter, who had died, when he resuscitated that little girl to new life again, as the One who alone had the power of life over death residing within him! And then in Mark 9, we read how Jesus chose them once again, and Peter, to accompany them to the top of Mount Tabor one evening where he was gloriously transfigured before them!

MAYBE THESE BROTHERS' AMBITION HAD BEEN EMBOLDENED BECAUSE THEY WERE MEMBERS OF THE UPPER CLASS AMONG THE PEOPLE LIVING IN PALESTINE and they were destined to inherit their father Zebedee's commercial fishing business—that had at least succeeded to the point that St. Mark tells us: Zebedee had hired a number of employees to run his trade (Mark 1:20)!

Nevertheless, these men had completely failed to understand Jesus' chief objective as the Holy Son of God now come into our world! They certainly did not have a firm grasp on Jesus' true identity—as expressed in the last verse of our Gospel lesson today—that serves as the pivotal point in Mark's Gospel around which the whole document revolves!

Jesus said: *“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant! And whoever would be first among you must be slave of all, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45)! But even after we have said all that we could say against James and John, concerning this episode in our Lord's life and ministry, this Gospel lesson still reveals one extremely important thing about them—as bewildered as they might have been—THEY STILL BELIEVED IN JESUS!

By the grace of God—they believed that Jesus would ultimately, one day, triumph over all of his detractors! And amazingly enough, they could still connect a future state of glory with a Galilean carpenter who had incurred the enmity and bitter opposition of the orthodox religious leaders—and who was apparently—heading for a cross.

These men are still manifesting out loud, through their conversation with Jesus—their deeply-held, profound HOPE that Jesus would ultimately triumph in the QUEST THAT SO POWERFULLY MOTIVATED HIM TO DO ALL THAT HE WAS DOING!!

Now while it might be tempting for me to spend the rest of my allotted time in this sermon—explaining more fully—the metaphors that Jesus uses when he speaks to James and John about their one day, drinking from the cup from which he was going to drink and their one day being baptized with the baptism he had to undergo, I am hoping we might focus our attention instead—upon the whole subject of being AMBITIOUS! BECAUSE WE ARE ALL AMBITIOUS IN ONE WAY, OR ANOTHER, AREN'T WE?

What is “ambition”? One dictionary I consulted defined ambition like this: Ambition is a strong desire to do or to achieve something, typically requiring a great deal of personal determination and hard work!

Well, obviously we can be motivated in life by a healthy sense of ambition but also be driven in life by an unhealthy and a harmful kind of ambition too!

A healthy sense of ambition reflects our God-given belief that he has put us upon this earth to do something—to do something with our lives—that will hopefully glorify him while, at the same times, serving the needs of our neighbors!

Developing a proper sense of ambition within our children can be a good thing when we are parents; like those parents teaching their children how to tie their own shoes—when they have reach the APPROPRIATE AGE for that to happen! Parents might say to their children: “You can do it! Just keep trying!” Or when taking music lessons, a parent might say to their child: “Just a little more practice and you can play that piece even better!”

Ambition motivates us. Ambition can motivate us to get up in the morning and to want to do our best at whatever it is that God has called upon us to do with our lives while we are living out our lives here as strangers and pilgrims upon this earth! While ambition can be a very healthy thing, unfortunately—as the Bible itself teaches us—there can be a VERY “dark side” to ambition too—a dark side called: “GREED.” Instead of PEOPLE WANTING to do something with their lives that would glorify God and serve the needs of other human beings all around us—GREED—MOTIVATES PEOPLE TO DO THE THINGS THEY ARE DOING—ONLY TO GET MORE OF THE THINGS THEY WANT OUT OF LIFE FOR THEMSEVES!

Left unchecked, greed is like a cancer that grows and spreads and infects everything it touches! Greed is cyclical—because the more you acquire the more you want.

No matter how much you acquire it will never be enough! This great truth is what motivated St Paul to write to Timothy, one day saying: *“Godliness with contentment great gain! For just as we brought nothing into the world, we can’t take anything out of it either! But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. For those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the LOVE OF MONEY is the root of all evil, and in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains! As for those who are rich in this present age, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17)!*

St Paul is reminding us that when greed takes hold of ambition, it can easily corrupt us and then eventually kill us! So let me ask you: Does the name “Kenneth Lay” mean anything to you? Kenneth Lay was the eventual founder and the CEO of that gigantic corporation known as ENRON. He was a man who grew up in Missouri; very much so in a Christian home because he was the son of a Baptist minister. While his family—would have been characterized as being in the Lower-Middle Class, even as a boy, Ken was highly motivated—and very ambitious!

Upon his graduation from high school he was accepted into the University of Missouri, where he earned his bachelor’s degree. He went on from there to land a job with Exxon in Houston, Texas; a job that eventually landed him an even better job in our federal government as a “federal regulator.”

Shortly after this Kenneth Lay became an “Undersecretary for the Department of the Interior!” To put it mildly, he was a “rising star!” When the federal government deregulated energy, however, Kenneth Lay returned to the private sector to form the company ENRON. It quickly became a high tech corporation on the cutting edge. Its stock soared! Investors could not get enough of it. Then it

fizzled and eventually it crashed! As it turns out, Kenneth Lay and his employees were falsifying reports, “cooking the books,” so as to exaggerate their earnings!

To this day, people who knew Kenneth Lay contend that he was a good man at heart, yet, something went wrong! Instead of enjoying the fruits of his success an unhealthy sense of ambition got the best of him. In the end, he was convicted of fraud and conspiracy. He would have gone to prison, but he died of a heart attack while awaiting his sentence!

Friends, the Bible teaches us repeatedly that there is a downside and a dark side to ambition and it is called GREED. Greed is something that becomes visible to us whenever one person steps upon another person—just to get ahead. And isn't this the proposition James and John were setting before Jesus—when they were having this private conversation with him—when none of Jesus' other disciples were even within earshot of anything they had to say!

Jesus responded to their request not with words of condemnation, but in his attempting to enlighten them concerning the dangerous nature, of their request!

*“You don't know what you are saying! Are you able to drink the cup that I must drink, and to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”*

Here, our Lord is certainly referring to his impending suffering and death into which he will be plunged—baptized into—at the cross; sufferings which would completely overwhelm his soul and eventually solicit forth from him that fourth sentence he would speak from the cross: *“Eli, Eli lama sabachthani!”* These words are Aramaic for: *“My God, my God why have you forsaken me”* (Matthew 27:46)?

When we genuinely take time to meditate upon our Lord's answer, we cannot help but see—the patience, the kindness and love which is being exhibited by Jesus here towards James and John.

As we know from the New Testament, the words of Jesus came true for these disciples in their lives! The Apostle James died by the sword of Herod Agrippa in Acts 12:2, and the Apostle John eventually ended up being exiled to the Greek island called “Patmos” where church tradition says he died!

To be ambitious means that we all want various things out of life, which is certainly not a bad thing in and of itself. BUT THE BIBLE CONTINUOUSLY ASKS US TO CONSIDER HOW WE WILL RELATE TO OTHER PEOPLE—WITH OTHER PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES INTERSECT WITH OUR OWN!

Ambition can be a very healthy thing when it motivates us to reach our God-given potential. And yet ambition can be an even healthier thing for us—when THE GOSPEL CREATES WITHIN US A HEART—FOR OTHER PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD WHOM JESUS HIMSELF LABELED ONE DAY AS “LOST!”

Ambition has also been defined, at times, as one's “desire to succeed” and yet, practically speaking, there are only TWO CONTROLLING AMBITIONS TO WHICH ALL OTHER AMBITIONS MAY BE REDUCED. Are we living primarily to promote ourselves and seek our own glory, or are we living primarily to glorify God with our lives!?!

Ambition is a good thing, a godly thing, whenever we become ambitious about deepening our relationship with the Triune God, and following Jesus Christ his Son as closely through our acts of obedience towards him as we possibly can!

*“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over the, and their great ones, exercise authority over them! But it shall not be so among you! But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many!” Amen*