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James 3:13-4:3

Mark 9:30-37

September 23, 2018

GREATNESS

He was born in 1834, in New Hampshire, but at age 19, Abel Pierce decided to stow away on a ship headed for Port Lavaca, Texas, to seek his fame and fortune. When he arrived, he had 75 cents in his pocket. With his lanky appearance, he soon got the nickname of Shanghai, referring to his resemblance to a Shanghai rooster, with his 6'4" frame like that of the long-legged breed of roosters.

From the very start, Shanghai Pierce began to work in the cattle business, bartering a year's work for \$200 worth of cattle to begin his own herd. After the year, he began branding stray cattle and building his herd. With his knowledge of how to care for cattle and a brash, aggressive style, Pierce became a cattle baron. At one point, his ranch in southeast Texas grew to half a million acres. He was quite a character. His chosen apparel generally included brocaded vests and broad-brimmed, high-peaked hats. He also ordered his own gravesite life-sized statue placed on a 20-foot granite pedestal prior to his death so that he could enjoy looking at himself. Supposedly, at sunset he would lift a glass to toast himself, "Here's to old Shanghai!"

At his ranch, he decided to build a town with everything needed by his employees. He called the town Thank God, Texas, until some of his more refined friends convinced him that Blessing, Texas, had a more acceptable feel to it. Once when some friends from New England were visiting, he showed them around town, bragging about his considerable accomplishments in building it. In a buggy pulled by two white horses, Shanghai pointed out the various landmarks. "Well, over there's the commissary - best in the territory. And over there's the school - two rooms, not one. And over there's the livery - the best blacksmith in the state of Texas. And over there is the saloon - finest whiskey on this side of the Mississippi." And the list went on and on, as Shanghai puffed out his chest like his namesake rooster. Near the end of the tour, one of his guests spotted the steeple of a church

set back in a group of mesquite trees. He asked his host, “Shanghai, do you belong to that church?” Shanghai spat out some tobacco juice and bellowed something akin to, “Heck, no! That church belongs to me.”¹

Some of Jesus’ disciples were following an agenda similar to the one guiding Shanghai Pierce as they bickered about who would be number one in controlling the church. They wanted to be considered the greatest among Jesus’ followers. Just like kids caught in bad behavior, they fall silent when Jesus asks what they were arguing about, hoping their transgression would be overlooked. Rather than forcing the confession, Jesus makes one of those amazing statements that undermine many preconceptions about reality: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

In doing so, Jesus begins to explain ‘greatness’ in different terms than his society and our society has tended to use. Let’s look at it a phrase at a time. Whoever wants to be first when it comes to following Jesus must be last – that sounds like a contradiction, but the word ‘paradox’ is a better description. Jesus warns about the great human appetite to push ahead of others, going after what we think will fill some form of emptiness within. Jesus tells his followers, don’t feed that appetite, it will only grow. In our text from the Book of James, there is an expressed concern that individuals in the early church were allowing envy and selfish ambition to set their agenda. Such priorities, however, part company with a life shaped by gentleness, born of wisdom from above.

Let’s look at the second part of Jesus’ statement: “Whoever wants to be first must be servant of all.” He does not call us to be servant **to** all, in which we would be running hither and yon following the instructions and priorities of everyone out there. Rather, we are called to be servant **of** all. It’s not position or possession that as followers of Jesus, we are to pursue. It’s carrying out the call to be a servant that is in keeping with this different kind of wisdom that Jesus lifts up. He calls us away from a self-aggrandizing focus to an openness of heart and a commitment of energy toward the needs of others.

In Mark’s telling, he gets his followers to focus on a young child, someone who was not physically strong, someone who had little voice in shaping his or her future,

someone who was almost totally vulnerable. Particularly in that society, children could not open doors to power or privilege for others. But Jesus says, put away selfish ambitions and you can open yourselves to a life guided by a different kind of wisdom. Welcome a child like this, Jesus says, focus your efforts on those who can't help you further your selfish agendas, and it will be like you are welcoming God's wisdom as well as welcoming me into your life.

Martin Luther King, Jr. reflected what the church of Jesus Christ is called to be when he said, "Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace; a soul generated by love."² There are those in our society who view greatness as the ability to impose their will or their salacious desires upon those who are less powerful. The church is called to a different understanding and practice of greatness, one which calls us to serve with our very heart and soul those who most vulnerable. From those who live in the suburbs of the poorest large city in our country, what would true service look like, in regards to those who are mired in poverty? What would a heart and soul dedicated to serving the most vulnerable do when children of those who came to this country simply seeking asylum from abuse and war elsewhere are held in ongoing detention separated from their families? When addiction to alcohol or drugs or gambling is ripping so many families apart, what initiatives should a congregation with a serving heart take?

I was thankful that last Sunday we were able to have Margeret Mwale, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) staff person with us to help us get a glimpse of how our giving toward One Great Hour of Sharing impacts those who have gone through a disaster through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, assists those who struggle with hunger through the Presbyterian Hunger Program, and empowers those mired in poverty through Self-Development of People. I have a greater appreciation for why that special offering is called One **Great** Hour of Sharing. The spirit behind that offering is the kind of greatness Jesus wants to inspire. But if we are to be the church of Jesus Christ, we certainly need to live out that spirit more than once a year.

The church, this gathering of followers of Jesus, doesn't belong to any of us. Jesus remains Lord of the church. He continues to challenge our priorities and call us to a way of living that goes deeper and broader than we would be inclined to do so. We honor him when we serve others. Poor Shanghai Pierce, names a town Thank God, but doesn't have anyone other than himself to toast. We have a different way to say, "Thank God." Let's look for the kind of greatness to which Jesus calls us – where we truly serve with all of our heart and soul those in need, those who are vulnerable, those who are marginalized. As we do so, I dare say we will be welcoming the very presence of our Lord Jesus into our midst and we will rediscover the One to whom the church actually belongs.

¹ From a story shared by Rev. David Galloway in a sermon on Day1.org entitled, "Shanghaied," September 24, 2006, augmented by facts from <https://www.karankawa.com/history/>

² Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love, New York: Harper and Row, 1963.