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“The Parable of the Bad Seats”

Sermon Series: Twice Told Tales: Parables for Skeptics

Scripture Lesson: *Matthew 14:7-11*

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What makes us great? The proper question is “Who.” Who makes us great? Let us pray.

*Lord God, we know that You alone are great.
Fill us with your Holy Spirit this morning so
that we may be transformed by Your greatness.
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior
and Friend, our Lord and our Hope. Amen.*

The question which we are taking a look at this week is, “What makes someone great.” I think there is a time in all of our lives when we had, or perhaps still have, dreams of becoming someone great. We want to live out our dreams. We want people to know our name, to speak of it with admiration and respect. The great problem is that few of us have any idea what greatness really, truly is.

Some of you may know the story of Larry Walters. Larry Walters was a truck driver and Vietnam Veteran who, a few years ago, flew 10 miles at about 16,000 feet high. Now that isn't a very interesting story until you stop to consider how Larry flew. Larry purchased 45 weather balloons and then went to Sears where he bought an aluminum lawn chair. He filled the balloons with helium and fastened them to the chair and brought with him a BB gun so he could shoot the balloons to bring himself down again. The only problem is that Larry's calculations were not quite right and the winds pulled him into the flight path of the Long Beach Airport, where pilots from a TWA and Delta flight called in reporting that they saw what appeared to be a man in a lawn chair tied to some balloons floating in the middle of the sky. Eventually Larry shot his balloons and came back

down to earth, where he was immediately arrested. But within a few weeks Larry Walters had appeared on the Tonight Show and Late Night with David Letterman. With his newfound fame he quit his job driving a truck, and for little while made a living as a motivational speaker. The Smithsonian asked for his lawn chair. Dozens of men have imitated Larry Walters, most recently as three weeks ago in Oregon. A reporter asked Larry why he did it. He said, “It was something I had to do. I had this dream for twenty years, and if I hadn't done it, I think I would have ended up in the funny farm.”¹

What is it that makes someone great? Is it living out our dreams? Is it having our name known? Is it having an achievement recognized by a museum? It is being imitated? William Shakespeare wrote in *Twelfth Night*, “Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them.” I want to teach this morning what Jesus said about greatness. Jesus said it's a “who” which makes us great, not a “what.”

Not long before He went to the cross, Jesus was invited over for Sunday dinner at the house of a religious leader. Now make no mistake. This was not a courtesy. This was not a nice “get to know ya.” The religious leaders of the day were very threatened by Jesus and they invited him over so they could find Him doing something wrong and trap Him. As the dinner started, Jesus noticed something very interesting. He saw that all the guests were trying to grab the seat of honor. No one wanted to sit at the kids' table. It had to be quite a scene—all of these religious leaders jockeying for position, attempting to place themselves in the most

prestigious chair, wanting to sit closest to the head of the table. You can almost picture them in their full dress with the tall hats, the long beards, and the dark, flowing robes gently asserting, “That’s my glass, there near the head of the table. I already drank from that glass.” Confronted with this ugliness Jesus told a parable about going to a wedding feast.

Jesus said that when you are invited to a wedding feast, it is a bad idea to take the seat of honor. Because if you take the seat of honor and a guest of greater rank comes along, the host, the master of the feast, may come to you and say, “Friend, please move down.” If you are someone who ranks pretty low on the invite list, you may be asked to move down several times. And this will just be plain embarrassing. Instead, Jesus instructed when you are invited to a wedding feast it is wiser to take the lowest seat so that the host may come to your seat and say, “Friend, move up higher.” Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.

Now, what is going on here? This sounds a little too much like Ms. Manners to be some pertinent instruction from the Savior and the Lord of the Universe about how to live our life. You may find yourself asking, “What’s next? A commandment about how to discern the salad fork?”

But Jesus, as always, brings it home. *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 14:11* I actually have a real life example of this. Someone I know—not me—let’s call him “Derrick,” (yes, yes that’ll do) once bought cheap tickets with a friend to a basketball game. The two friends spied some nice, empty seats down low, close to the bench, by the half court line. The seats remained empty as the minutes began to fall away in the first half. So, “Derrick” and his friend moved down. The two were very much enjoying the new seats and congratulating themselves on their bold move, when an usher tapped one of them on the shoulder and asked to see their tickets. Behind the usher was standing a rather distinguished looking, very impatient appearing man and his wife. The usher led “Derrick” and his friend all the way up the steps through row after row of

knowing fans. It was humiliating. At least that’s what Derrick said.

Christ is not alone in saying that everyone who exalts himself will be humbled. *Proverbs 16:18* teaches *“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”* Scripture is full of examples of people who exalted themselves in some way and were then humbled: Pharaoh, Samson, Nebuchadnezzar, Saul, David, Absalom, Queen Jezebel, King Ahab, the Pharisees. You can bet the farm that anyone you come across in Scripture, who exalts themselves or who boasts in anything but God and His grace, will find themselves humbled. The one lesson which we must get right as a human being is the simple truth that there is a God and we are not Him.

Of course, that is only half of what Christ’s parable is all about. He also taught us that *“whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”* We all possess within that instinct to become someone greater. There is something in most of us that drives us forward, spurs us ahead, making us want to be more than we are. This drive to greatness is the image of God in us which tells us we can be something more, something greater. It is imprinted upon our heart and soul, engraved with an iron pen. If we want to fulfill that image, if we really want to live like the image of God, we will look to Jesus Christ because we were made to live like Him by living in Him. I don’t mean to walk around in a robe and sandals. I don’t even necessarily mean teaching, preaching and healing. But we should be humble and take the lowest seat every chance we get, content to trust that God will move us up when He is ready.

When Jesus speaks about humility and exaltation, it is not just an academic discussion. Jesus knows first hand the depths of absolute humility and the dizzying heights of exaltation. *Philippians 2:8-11* *“And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

Jesus took the lowest seat at the table and the Father moved Him up to the Head. And He will do the same for us as we humble ourselves to follow Him.

So the question for us must be not “what” makes someone great, but “Who” makes someone great? 1 Chronicles 29:12 teaches us, *“Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all.”* This really runs against the grain for us as we like to admire the self-made individual. But the Bible is very clear that it is God who makes us great—not ourselves, not others, not our talents and abilities, not our bank account, our annual performance review, a publisher, or history. It is God who makes us great.

In our pursuit of greatness everything we do in this world is done to either impress ourselves, other people, or God. Some people live to impress themselves, convince themselves of their own greatness. I have had a bad habit of wanting to be in the center of every picture of a crowd. You cannot find a picture of me from about age 15 to age 30 where I have not elbowed my way right into the middle of the crowd, implying for the historical record and myself that the crowd just forms around me naturally. There are people who simply live to satisfy their own dreams, to make something of themselves, to feel good about who they are. These are the Larry Walters of the world, who are so consumed by living out their personal dreams that they risk everything to do it. We admire and even celebrate people who achieve their personal dreams, but rarely do we hear the rest of the story. Eleven years after he lived out his dream—the dream which he said if he couldn’t live out he would lose his mind—Larry Walters went for a hike in one of his favorite spots in the Angeles National Forest and took his own life. We simply cannot impress ourselves forever because we know ourselves too well.

If we aren’t that concerned with impressing ourselves, we may be concerned with impressing other people. We want to be respected, admired, recognized, noticed, celebrated, cherished. We want this because if other people claim this about us, perhaps it is really true. It is probably not too far off

the mark to say that proving ourselves to others is the national pastime. We can easily point to “Who’s Hot and Who’s Not” lists; self aggrandizing politicians or athletes. Does anyone besides me cringe a little bit at these reality shows that put past their prime B and C list celebrities back in front of the camera again? There is, of course, “Dancing with The Stars.” A lot of people seem to like that. But there is also celebrity boxing. That’s literally painful to watch. There are also celebrity weight loss shows. Then there is the kind where they follow around a minor celebrity in their daily life, making a spectacle of the train wreck that is their daily life. The Anna Nicole Smith Show is maybe the most notorious example of that. Scott Baio, better known as “Chachi” from *Happy Days*, has his own reality show. He spends the half hour looking up old girlfriends. Talk about being humbled! Apparently there is big money in watching those who have been exalted get humbled.

But what about when we exalt ourselves and are humbled? Most of us can point to events in our life which had us congratulating ourselves publicly on our skill of achievement, which had us lustily singing out loud to anyone who would hear the theme from “The Jeffersons,” “We’re movin’ on up...” We can also point to the times when we found ourselves being humbled and singing the blues. I will never forget my pride in telling friends and family that I was accepted with a substantial scholarship into the graduate school of religion at Vanderbilt University. That pride was surpassed only by the shame of telling people that less than a year later I was told there was no longer a place for me there. Have you ever received a Christmas letter which reads more like a self-nomination for the Nobel Prize rather than a friendly holiday greeting? Do we ever find ourselves tweaking our achievements a little bit, making mention of our accomplishments, ever so subtly putting someone in their place, masking our faults, exaggerating our friendships, oh so subtly moving toward the head of the table? Scripture’s promise is that the Master of the Feast will come and place us in our proper seat.

The key to greatness is living to impress God. It is God who puts the desire for greatness in our heart. The desire to be great is not a bad desire. But God wants us to be great in Him.

Let me take another angle briefly as I close. The disciples asked this very question to Jesus one day. “*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*” *Matthew 18:1*. Christ took a child and sat her in the middle of them. And He said, “*Whoever humbles himself like this child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*” *Matthew 18:4*. Let me tell you about one child who humbled herself and is now being exalted.

Three years ago Kai Leigh Harriot was playing on her porch in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Two stories below her a man named Anthony Warren was in the middle of an argument and he fired his pistol three times in the air. Kai and her older sister ran into the apartment as the bullets whizzed by them. But when Kai asked her sister to flip her over, they discovered that Kai was bleeding quite badly from her back. One of the bullets had severed her spine, crippling her from the chest down.

The case took nearly three years to come to trial, but when it finally did, little Kai—now aged five—took the stand to testify about the untold the damage this one mindless act had inflicted upon her life. Through the tears she said to the court and to the defendant, “I forgive you Anthony Warren. What you did to me was wrong, but I still forgive you.”² Warren immediately changed his plea from ‘not guilty’ to “guilty.” The two have even become friends.

We may say that little Kai Leigh Harriot has been given a bad seat at the wedding feast, that she has been robbed of her dreams, stricken with a terrible burden. But I would submit to you that this little girl has been tapped on the shoulder by the Master of the Feast and commanded, “Friend, move up higher.”

He will move you and I up too, if we are content in Him to take the lowest seat. The question is not “What makes us great?” but “Who makes us great?” And the answer is, the Master of the Feast, our Heavenly Father.

Would you pray with me please?

¹Found on Wikipedia.com, entry on Larry Walters

²Laurel J. Sweet, “Courage Unites Court in Tears: Family Finds Forgiveness for Con Who Shot Girl,” *Boston Herald*, April 14, 2006.