Excellent adventure: Cruciform calling

by L. Gregory Jones in the April 5, 2003 issue

Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great." So Jim Collins begins his book, *Good to Great*, a study of how 11 companies made the transition from being merely good to great.

Convinced that the book has profound relevance for the church and its ministry, I assigned it as a text for my course on "Leadership and Discipleship." But when students saw it on the syllabus, not everyone approved. As an African-American student put it, "Dean Jones, I thought you were saved and everything, and here you are having us read a book about business."

She had solid reasons to be skeptical about a book focused on moving from good to great, especially for followers of One who criticized James and John for their pretensions to greatness. Invocations of greatness in our culture often emphasize exceptional effort, intentionality, competence and skill. Yet Christian communities are called to follow a crucified Savior. The kingdom seems to privilege "the poor, crippled, lame and blind." And Christians are called to welcome "the least" to our tables and into our congregations. We are also called to recognize the persistent reality of human sinfulness.

Even so, the threads of Collins's argument press in theologically interesting directions. He writes, "Those who turn good into great are motivated by a deep *creative* urge and an *inner* compulsion for sheer unadulterated excellence *for its own sake*. Those who build and perpetuate mediocrity, in contrast, are motivated more by the fear of being left behind." Pursuing excellence for its own sake, overcoming mediocrity and being shaped by a creative desire to do whatever you do as well as you possibly can—could that mean practicing discipleship, following a crucified Savior as well as we possibly can, and holding ourselves to a desire for unadulterated excellence in our ministry for the sake of Christ, even with the least, the last and the lost?

The Letter to the Philippians offers a significant context for reflection. After all, the letter is shaped by a profound sense of the cost of discipleship, the centrality of

Christ's self-emptying life, death and resurrection, as well as the awesome gift and task of the body of Christ to discern the "mind of Christ." Yet it is here that Paul also urges the Philippians to think about excellence and anything worthy of praise (Phil. 4:8).

Paul urges us to renounce "selfish ambition." The use of the adjective would seem to suggest that we not renounce ambition per se, but ambition that diminishes and destroys life because of its selfishness. Instead, we are invited to a life shaped by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (2:5-11). We are to be ambitious for the gospel.

Similarly, perhaps we are called to renounce worldly excellence—excellence defined by worldly standards of success and significance. We ought not, however, give up aspirations to genuine excellence of faith and life—to those things that cultivate and increase the love of God and neighbor.

We reject worldly excellence, then, but cultivate a "cruciform excellence" in Christian ministry, discerning the mind of Christ in fidelity to the pattern of the crucified and risen Christ. Our ministry is cruciform because it must have at its center brokenness and vulnerability, acknowledging the ongoing reality of sin in the world and in our lives. Forgiveness and reconciliation are crucial as both gift and task. At the same time, we also want our ministry to be genuinely excellent, and we cultivate "a deep creative urge and an inner compulsion for sheer unadulterated excellence" in faithfulness to the God of Jesus Christ. We aspire to excellence, but it is an excellence defined not by the world's standards of leadership and power, but by faithfulness to Christ.

What might this look like? In *Open Secrets*, Richard Lischer offers an eloquent description of cruciform excellence in pastoral ministry by contrasting the power of Watergate figures John and Mo Dean with the quiet, hidden faithfulness of a pastor's calling.

> A minister may drive 25 miles to a hospital in order to recite a 30-second prayer and make the sign of the cross over a comatose parishioner. Who sees this act and judges it to be good? The pastor may devote years of conversation and behind-the-scenes maneuvering in order to promote reconciliation among factions in the community. The preacher may invest

> 15 hours of biblical research and reflection on a 15-minute speech for no other purpose than to make God a little more believable to the congregation.
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> Place this near-quixotic pursuit of *souls* beside the creamy power of people like John and Mo, and even a saint will doubt his or her vocation. Does the work of ministry really have the significance we attach to it? What is more important, the political power that openly rules the world, or the kingdom of God that secretly consecrates it?

Perhaps if we articulated a more robust understanding of cruciform excellence, we would be less likely to doubt our own vocations. To be sure, the criteria by which we measure our ministry will be different from those of businesses, and more difficult to summarize. But our standards of excellence will enable our ministry to grow in beauty, grace and purpose.