

Heroic ambition: Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

by [Paul J. Wadell](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

I want the best for my students. That's why I love talking to them about the virtue of magnanimity and its corresponding vice of pusillanimity, a word that is hard to spell and even harder to pronounce, but important to understand. Magnanimous people consistently set their sights high. In everything they do, they aspire to what is best. Not fearing the cost of heroic ambitions, they strive for excellence and hunger for greatness. *Magnanimity* literally means to be of great soul or spirit, and it characterizes persons who remain resolutely focused on the utmost possibilities for life. By contrast, pusillanimous men and women lower their sights and regularly opt for whatever is easier, more pleasurable or quickly attainable. Not willing to devote themselves to discipline and sacrifice, they foster puny ambitions and thus deny themselves the joy and meaning and satisfaction that come from transcending themselves in love. That's why magnanimity is one virtue I want my students to learn by heart. I don't want them to suffer the sadness that comes from renouncing greatness.

But how do we understand greatness? How do we measure success? These questions go to the heart of the Gospel reading from Mark, which begins with James and John getting a jump on their comrades by asking Jesus to reserve the most prestigious seats for them—"one at your right hand and one at your left"—when he enters into glory. It is easy to dismiss the two brothers for being brazenly opportunistic, jockeying for position when, at the very least, they ought to be more discreet. But Jesus knows that James and John only voice what is on the minds of the others. The apostles all want the payoff that comes from following Jesus. They all have their eyes on the prize.

Interestingly, Jesus doesn't chide them for making the request, which confirms that their desire for greatness is not misplaced. But he lets them know that for those who follow him, the path to glory takes a shockingly different direction. Once again, he turns our ordinary understanding of success upside down.

Nothing so vividly captures the difference between a life of Christian discipleship and lives centered on other philosophies as what Jesus says. "But it is not so among

you,” he tells the disciples, pointedly contrasting how greatness is measured in the world with how it is attained in the Christian life, and directly addressing the human desire to distinguish ourselves through power, privilege and prestige. Let’s face it, all of us live “among the gentiles”: we enjoy lording it over others. In this respect, there’s something of the tyrant in all of us. The way of the world equates greatness with being catered to and served, with being singled out and set apart. The successful are those powerful enough to always get their way.

Jesus challenges us to picture greatness differently. Those who want to share in Jesus’ glory must be fit with a greatness that comes from embracing a way of life that seems to have everything backward. “Whoever wishes to be great among you” must set out in what seems the opposite direction of greatness. In the Christian life, greatness is measured in serving, in expending ourselves in love, sacrifice and generosity to others. Moreover, honor is found not in titles or privilege or celebrity or wealth, but in goodness and humility. In the strange world of the reign of God, power is not a matter of ruling over others but of living on their behalf.

Perhaps most shocking is Jesus’ warning that the road to glory and exultation is only by way of the cross. The Gospel passage is immediately preceded by Jesus’ prediction of his passion and death. He tells the disciples that he will reach Jerusalem, but only by passing through a gauntlet of diminishments. He will be mocked and humiliated, stripped and whipped, and crucified till all life bleeds out of him.

It is in light of this sobering announcement that we must understand Jesus’ response to a request to share in his glory. “You do not know what you are asking,” Jesus says. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” Anyone who follows him, he cautions, will be immersed in sorrow, affliction and loss. There is no alternative path to blessedness, no scenic route to Jerusalem. There’s only one way to beatitude and it involves sharing in his passion. The reading from Hebrews suggests this as well. If Jesus is the true and final high priest who achieved glory through the scandal of the cross and who was perfected through suffering, it is no different for those who promise to know life as his disciples.

Christianity is an inherently magnanimous life, a life of truly heroic ambition. But given what these readings disclose about greatness and glory, it’s no wonder that a pusillanimous life is tempting.