

How to achieve true greatness

Message for Sunday, August 6, 2017
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Mark 10:42-45 and more

Joe Parker whistled happily as he walked from his car to the office Monday morning. He was in a good mood. Everything was going so well these days, and he was proud of his achievements.

He easily bounced up the steps leading to the front door. Reaching his room, he took off his coat, and hung it carefully in its usual place in the closet. He slid into the luxurious leather chair behind the mahogany desk. He took a deep breath, smelling the rich leather. He slipped off his shoes, and sunk his feet into the deep pile carpet. Joe Parker enjoyed being here.

His morning cup of coffee was steaming on the counter by the window. His private secretary had made it fresh just in time for his arrival. “Isn’t this great?”, Joe thought to himself. “I have a staff of people out there ready to do whatever I want. I just sit here, and call them on the phone. They come to see me, I tell them what I want, and they run off to do my bidding.”

Joe looked at his calendar to see what he had to do that day. There was a luncheon meeting with a group of executives from pulp and paper companies. The president of one of the largest companies had invited him to come to his private club for a game of racquetball after the meeting. They would be better able to talk about some business matters with no one else around to listen.

He was to be the guest speaker at a dinner given by the Chamber of Commerce. He would take advantage of the media spotlight to present his department’s policy on pollution standards for the next decade. He expected he would receive a standing ovation for the leadership he was giving as the new minister.

It hadn’t always been like this. He had spent years building up votes. While others were enjoying their families, Joe was out shaking hands, working the crowds at fairs, baseball games and high school reunions. He had lost track of how many babies he had kissed. The speeches, the promises, the secret

deals trailed behind him like yarn from a sweater caught on a thorn. He hoped his sweater wasn’t going to start to unravel.

That was Joe’s only worry: that sooner or later, everything would unravel. That he would be dumped at the side of the road, the same way that he had dumped so many of his friends.

He had dreams of great things he wanted to accomplish:

- He wanted to undertake some really worthwhile projects, things that would get people back to full employment, so that his name would be remembered for years to come.
- His highest ambition was to be leader of the party.
- He hoped to be able to retire early from the frantic pace of politics, perhaps take a seat in the Senate.

However, Joe was now beginning to worry that none of this might ever happen. He did his best to cover his tracks, but he was having trouble sleeping at night. In his dreams, Joe saw faces gloating over him.

The buzzer on Joe’s phone brought him out of his daydream. A man was there to see him, but he had not made an appointment. Should the secretary send him away?

Joe was about to say, “Yes,” but, for some reason he still doesn’t understand, the words that came out were, “No, send him in.”

A tall dark haired man strode in. Joe stood up to shake hands, but stopped in his tracks as he looked at the stranger. The man wore a plain blue suit. It was his eyes. They were dark like his hair, yet they were shining. And they were looking straight at him—no, they were looking *inside* him!

Joe felt as though he was looking in a mirror, seeing himself as he really was. And suddenly, for the first time in his life, he felt ashamed of what he saw. He felt even more ashamed because he knew the stranger could see everything as well.

Joe wondered who this man was. Could it possibly be ...? He was churning with curiosity, but he was afraid to ask, since the answer might be yes.

“Joe Parker,” the stranger said, “I want you to come with me. I have something to show you.”

If anyone told Joe Parker where to go, they were themselves quickly told where to go. But this time Joe said nothing. There was something about this man that commanded respect: not out of fear, but simply out of his presence.

They left the office and got into an elevator by themselves. When the elevator doors opened, they were no longer in the office building.

The stranger led the way out along a dusty road. They stepped to one side to allow a heavily laden donkey pass by. Up ahead, in the shade of a large tree, a group of men were shouting and arguing. The stranger drew Joe to the outside of the group, so they could listen in.

Joe was startled, for among the group was a man who looked just like his guide. This man told the others to be quiet, and began talking.

“You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them.”

Joe nodded his head up and down. He knew all about lording it over people.

“But it shall not be so among you.”

The man talking looked up at Joe, and it seemed as though he was speaking only to him.

“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.”

Joe’s mind reeled as he tried to take in this thought. “Surely he doesn’t mean in Canada in the 21st century,” his intellect reasoned. “This simple, naive philosophy may have worked back then—although I doubt even that: look where it got Jesus. It certainly doesn’t apply in today’s world. I should know; I’ve seen it all.”

But his logic seemed like feeble excuses as the man continued talking...

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” [see Mark 10:42-45]

Joe now knew who was beside him. It was Jesus. Joe remembered his church men’s group, the AOTS, and the motto they had taken from Jesus own words: “I have come as one that serves.” He had recited those words countless times in their meetings, but until now he had never thought about their meaning.

He began to imagine what would happen if he tried to live like that. Why, a person in his position, with that kind of goal, could do wonderful things!

While he was still thinking, Jesus nudged him along. I can only tell briefly what Joe saw that day.

He watched with awe as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, the job of a slave. [John 13:1-17]

He held his breath as he heard Jesus in Gethsemane give his life into God’s hands, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours be done.” [Mark 14:36]

He listened with amazement as the religious leaders accused Jesus of all sorts of evil, while Jesus made no attempt to defend himself. [Matthew 26:62; 27:12]

He cringed as he watched the soldiers pound the spikes through the hands and feet of Jesus. Then, hardly believing his ears, he heard Jesus say, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” [Luke 23:34]

Yes, Joe realized, it was true that Jesus’ philosophy had not gotten him very far in life. But he had achieved true greatness, by giving his life for those he loved.

As Joe looked over his own life, he realized that the great plans he had dreamed of were actually petty and selfish. He now understood what true greatness was all about, and he determined that he would make that his goal: to be great by being helping

those around him, instead of looking out for himself.

Now I really didn't come here today to talk about imaginary people. I came here to talk about real people, with real lives and real problems. I came to talk about us.

Most of us are not in a position of power like Joe Parker. You may not be as power hungry as he was. Yet each of us does exercise some degree of power over others:

- our children
- our husbands and wives
- the cashier at the grocery checkout
- neighbours
- people at work.

You don't have to be big to be great. You just need to think big of others.

Talk about this in your table group:

- What did you hear from Jesus? And, what are you going to do with what you just heard?
- Recall an example of someone—not yourself—serving someone else. What impression did that make on you?