

I have never been a great fan of boxing. Having said that I must confess there is a place in my heart for Gentleman Jim Braddock. I grew up listening to my father talk about his listening to the radio. Names like Max Bear. Joe Louis and Gentleman Jim Braddock were part of the mythology of my childhood. But my own experience of the sport of boxing arrived with Mohammed Ali. His proclamation of, “I am the greatest” did not ring well with me. I am still more impressed by the fact that Jesus never beat his chest in that style. And as great as might be the legacy of many figures in sport.....I am more tempted to react with, “It's only a game.” Or in some cases, “It's organized brutishness.”

It is not only that Jesus never screamed at the world, “I am the greatest!” Those words or even those sentiments do not fall from the lips of the likes of Matthew, James, John or even Peter when they get around to preaching, teaching, and writing. In fact John is most likely to remind us over and over again, “This is what we heard from the beginning. We should love one another.” And Peter who is (there can be no disputing this without an ignoring of history) a key figure in the history of the early church, in a time of great persecution, wrote... “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1 Peter 1:3) That is a long way from proclaiming, “I am the greatest.”

But apparently there was a time when Peter was part of that discussion....who is the greatest! Expressing a desire to be the greatest among Jesus followers. Mark tells us, and Mark's most immediate source was his uncle Peter. “They came to Capernaum.”

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Jesus and the disciples, the twelve, and the rest of that crowd that followed Jesus everywhere. They listened to his teaching and preaching. They learned to believe in God's presence and His power. They were the witnesses of miracles. Healings, cleansings (that's really what a casting out of demons is all about). They developed a taste for what God was doing through Jesus and they developed an appetite for more and more and more even when they did not understand it all. It's important for us to realize there was a time when they did not understand it all...in fact they

probably (like us) never pretended to understand it all.

They came to Capernaum. And they went into a house. They received hospitality. They participated in hospitality. Sharing food and drink and being out of the weather, and yet not owning any of that. And while they were in that house Jesus asked the 12 a question. “What were you arguing about on the road?” The word is arguing. In fact the King James translation puts it this way. “What was it you disputed among yourselves by the way.” What was the dispute about on the road? Dispute. Argument. Jesus, was aware they had been arguing. There was heat. There was disunity. He wanted to know its cause for there would surely come a time when if they were not united, they would cease to be together. And they would cease to be His. Mark says, “they kept quiet because on the way, on the road they had argued about who was the greatest.”

Their argument, the dispute embarrassed them. Not one of them wanted to tell Jesus or have Jesus find out they were arguing, not about Jesus greatness, not about the greatness of God, but rather about their greatness. Their importance to the cause. Their relationship to Jesus. Somebody had said, I am the greatest. The most important. The one who does the real heavy lifting. It

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embarrassed them that they had made so much noise about it that Jesus had become aware they were actually arguing the case of personal importance to the cause....which they really did not understand and would not understand until Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead on the third day...a Sunday. Every Sunday reminds us as believers what being a Christian is all about. It is not church day. It is not worship day. That is the response to what it is all about. Being Christian is about Jesus. Being Christian is about the facts that he was crucified, dead and buried and on Sunday morning He arose. He is alive. Worship...church....is a response to that mind blowing set of facts. He died for us. He rose for us. And it is true...true.

I said they were embarrassed. They knew in their hearts every one of them, that if they said out loud, “Jesus I was arguing that I am the greatest one here, and these other louts would not agree with me,” Jesus would disapprove. They knew it. They knew it the same way we know every time we sin, whether it is by saying something, doing

something, or our body language in response to what someone else has said or done....they knew each one and all. They were guilty of something profound. And they are still in fact learning that whether they tell Jesus what they did, what they were saying or not...He knows.

Faced by their silence, Jesus sat down. Read the gospels. Jesus often taught, not standing before the crowd, but seated in its midst. Seated with the twelve or the hundred and twenty gathered around him. He is about to teach. The silence deepens, after all that is part of why they are all here...to see what is going down and hear what Jesus says, because He teaches as one who has authority, not like the religious leaders they are used to, not like the

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Scribes and the Pharisees, the teachers of the Law.

Jesus did have something to say. He called the twelve. This is not a terribly public discourse. It is between Jesus and the twelve disciples who will become apostles. Disciples are students, learning, apostles are sent out to teach and serve others in Jesus name. What Jesus said to the twelve reveals the fact that he knew what they were disputing about when they were walking to get to this house. "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." Last, and the servant of all. The servant of everybody else. This is not the understanding of greatness in the court of King Herod. It is not the definition of greatness in the Roman Empire. And the truth is at this point in their relationship it is not the understanding of greatness among the twelve. That is precisely why Jesus has to tell them....Want to be first? Be last. And that means be servant to everyone else.

Here is where it gets scary. Jesus has said the words. He meant the words. A picture is worth so much more than words. "Jesus took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in His arms, Jesus said to them, "whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, does not welcome me, but the One who sent me."

When Jesus stood a little boy among the disciples he was making a point. The little boy is probably more capable of believing Jesus than they are. Jesus did not use an adult of any kind for this object lesson.

And the fact is, as men, they were less likely to spend a lot of time thinking about little boys as important. Jesus says, the adult who welcomes this little one I am holding in my arms, in my name....in the name of Jesus, welcomes Jesus himself.

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And if we didn't get it the first time Jesus adds, "and whoever welcomes me, does not welcome me...Jesus son of Joseph and Mary...but the one who sent me...in credal language...welcomes God the Father. In plain talk, whoever welcomes Jesus, welcomes God.

It puts things in perspective. It provides definition to what is our business. We are about God and faith in God. We are about God and God's purposes which are the saving of the lost, and the lifting up of those who bent low by life and in life. We are here to serve in God's name any to whom we may bring love and mercy, peace and joy, and hope in a context of faith.

Whether we like it or not, the fact is we count the days, the hours and the minutes of time. We count the years. A year has come to its conclusion. 2014 is gone. This is the first Sunday in the new year of 2015. The reality is today is simply the Sunday after the Sunday before it. There is no profound meaning to the beginning of a new year in spite of the hype and the partying that tends to mark such occasions. Life goes on. For some life ends. As a band of Christians we have a mission. It is the same mission of last year's work and the year before that and the year before that. The questions that come before us as a church will have to do with how to do our work faithfully...as a people who are made new in Jesus and want to share this new life with others.

Greatness, and the greatness of our achievements will be found in this....did we seek to advance ourselves, or did we seek to serve others? Did we try to make ourselves the first in line, or did we see to it that others got a seat, were accommodated, were fed before we were. We cannot defend our wanting to be in charge. Being last or least means being servant to everybody else. Jesus calls us. Me,

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you, each one of us. To serve those who are involved in the fellowship and especially those who come among us as...strangers. In welcoming those who seem to be less important, in fact we will do duty with the angels, and

we will be the people of God.

The New Year is an old opportunity, yet again. To follow Jesus wherever He leads. To follow Jesus, in such a way as to minister to the world at our doorsteps.

Let us Pray;

Heavenly Father open to us windows and doors of opportunity. Grant that we might see your leading Holy Spirit as opportunities arise. Grant us faith to go where you lead, to minister to those among whom you afford us opportunity. To your name O God, be the honour and the glory and the praise. Amen