

Sermon Notes for 9/20/15 (Pentecost 17)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN by Mark G. Press

Text: Mark 9:30-37

Theme: SO WHAT’S YOUR AMBITION?

Introduction: Ambition is usually characterized as something evil – or at least as something less than desirable as a human trait. Remember in Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar* the great dialogue at Caesar’s funeral between Marc Antony and Brutus (the latter of whom had been one of the group that raised their hands against Caesar and assassinated him – Caesar’s last words, “Et tu, Brute?”)? This excerpt from Antony’s speech is his reply to Brutus’ accusation that Caesar was ambitious. Remember it?

[Caesar] was my friend, faithful and just to me:
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.
He hath brought many captives home to Rome
Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill:
Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?
When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept:
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.
You all did see that on the Lupercal
I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
Which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition?
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And, sure, he is an honourable man.
I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
But here I am to speak what I do know.

Most often, ambition is pictured in just such a negative light. Brutus insisted that the reason for his participation in the assassination is that Caesar was ambitious, and Antony (in contrast to what his words say) did speak to disprove that, arguing in essence that Caesar was not ambitious.

The disciples seemed like ambitious men. As the group made their way down the road, they no doubt fanned out single-file, an alligator-style caravan, behind the Teacher. The paths were typically narrow enough to allow no more than two people together, and no disciple would presume to walk shoulder to shoulder with the master. But strains of their conversation must have floated up to Jesus’ ears as He made His way along. They argued on the road, we are told, about who was the greatest – and this, immediately after Jesus’ second prediction of His upcoming passion.

We heard the first such prediction in last week’s Gospel, after Peter’s great confession (“You are the Christ”), which was followed by Peter’s protests against any cross talk (no doubt echoed by the other apostles as well). Today we hear Jesus say plainly, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” Then, we are told, Jesus had to call the disciples on their arguments about who was greatest among them. If we call this ambition on the part of the Twelve, we are seeing ambition from the same negative side that Shakespeare dealt with it. In that sense, ambition is something to avoid, something to confess, something for which to be forgiven.

And we know all too well the hardness of our own hearts as we are afflicted with the disease of ambition. James, brother of Jesus, puts it this way in today’s Epistle: “But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from

above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.” James twice qualifies his definition of ambition with the word “selfish.” That is pretty accurate, isn’t it? When ambition is selfish, self-centered, self-oriented, self-promoting, it is indeed devilish and unspiritual. We sense people’s selfish ambition, and we usually recoil from it instinctively. That is not surprising. Ambition can separate us from other people.

In fact, it seems that this negative side to ambition goes to the original meaning of the word. One source that discusses origins of words notes that ambition comes from the Latin *ambitionem*, which represents "a going around," especially to solicit votes, hence "a striving for favor, courting, flattery; a desire for honor, a thirst for popularity." Maybe some of you watched last week’s Republican debate. If so, you saw a number of ambitious people on the stage, all 15 of whom have indicated a desire to serve in this country’s highest office. If that ambition causes people to deal loosely with the truth or to shape their responses by expectations of public opinion or to belittle others who may not have the same standing or accomplishments, we can see how ambition may have a very negative flavor.

But there can also be a positive side to ambition, one which we also want to consider today. I would never argue that selfish ambition is something to be sought after. Selfish ambition is something to confess, not to parade about or to pursue. However, ambition can also work in positive directions. It need not be selfish.

What about it? Would we not say that Jesus had an ambition to live His whole life according to the will of the Father? Was it not Jesus’ ambition to submit His will in obedience in every situation? Would it not be proper to say that Jesus had the ambition to walk the way of the cross, despite the cost to Himself? In this sense, ambition is described as “an earnest desire for some type of achievement or distinction.” Of course, if the achievement or distinction is merely a question of power or wealth, we would never commend ambition. But when the achievement is along the lines that Jesus followed, then it looks quite different.

Jesus was ambitious in this sense, namely that He was singularly focused on putting His energies, His gifts, His very life, at the beck and call of the Father. His singular goal or achievement was the salvation of all human beings, and to that end He bent His every strength. Such a pursuit takes some ambitious thinking and acting. It takes determined decision-making at every moment of every day. It takes a man-sized willingness to seek the best, even at the expense of the good. That ambition led Jesus to some momentous conflicts, as Satan tried to throw every possible monkey-wrench into God’s salvation plan.

In the desert Satan tempted Jesus with many ways to avoid the hard and painful and excruciating ambition that was leading Jesus to Calvary. But Jesus’ ambition was to follow the Father’s Word, regardless of the offer of peace, security, fame that Satan held out. He quoted that Word over and over to the devil: “It is written. . .” Religious leaders tried to trip Jesus up with their questions and hypothetical (and hypocritical) “what if’s”. Jesus stayed relentlessly focused on doing and saying only what He learned from the Father. At times Jesus’ ambition put Him at odds with the apostles: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” The Twelve didn’t know how to take this word – at least, not until Jesus had risen from the dead, and they had been filled with His Spirit so that their ambition was transformed as well.

Ambition, we might say, is an active motivation that moves me toward some particular goal. We might use the parallel to money. Money in itself is not an evil thing. But the love of money, or the desire to have money in order to pursue some self-centered and worthless goal – that ambition is selfish, earthly and devilish. Ambition can be directed toward evil, self-centered and worthless goals, if we are ambitious to get a certain degree of power, to be able to order people around, to fulfill our sexual fantasies, to achieve notoriety, or to move up on the ladder of accomplishment.

But ambition can also be directed toward God-pleasing goals. Think of a man like Millard Fuller. He was

a young, self-made man, starting up a marketing firm while still in college, an effort that resulted in him becoming a millionaire by age 29. His personal ambition to be wealthy seemed to make him successful, but while his business flourished, he later acknowledged that his health, his integrity and his marriage suffered. Fuller reexamined his ambitions, acknowledged his sin, sold all he owned, and rededicated his life to serving his Savior Jesus. The Lord led him ultimately toward a new ambition, a godly ambition, namely using his God-given gifts to work toward eliminating poverty housing from his community and from the world. The organization Fuller founded, Habitat for Humanity, has built homes and improved housing for over 1 million families around the world. Selfish ambition can be redirected into areas of positive service, by the power and guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus sets His followers upon a new and very ambitious undertaking: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." There is an ambition well worth pursuing – service of the neighbor, even the neighbor who does not appreciate such service, who rejects me, and who mocks my service of Jesus my Lord. When our Lord calls us to love one another, to serve one another, He especially makes it a point that we are to forgive one another.

One preacher whom I have read lately suggests a new definition for forgiveness. He says it is: "Choosing to act and be for the good of the other, in relationship, despite what evil they have done." That is pretty good, I believe. Forgiveness is not overlooking or forgetting what real hurts may have taken place. It's not just ignoring what's been done or pretending it isn't that big a deal. Forgiveness is not allowing evil to persist, it is not giving in to evil's seeming omnipresence. It is not setting aside consequences or even just deserts for the evil that has been perpetrated. Forgiveness is the decision to act in love toward a certain person, even though they have done evil and may do evil again. This would be quite an exciting, compelling and renewing vision for our relationships with people, if we would only take it seriously.

When the Twelve argued about who was greatest, they were attempting to assert their own individual priority over the others. Perhaps one felt he was the best speaker, another was best with figures, another seemed to be best at connecting with strangers – and each one thought that his own gifts were the most important for the kingdom. Jesus did not put down their gifts or belittle them. But He held out to them a new ambition, an ambition that centered no longer on their service of self and their promotion of self. Instead, their ambition was to move them toward service that advanced God's kingdom purposes. They didn't learn that lesson perfectly, but they did learn it and put it into action.

Our Lord promises that "a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace." If His peace, His joy, His forgiveness, His grace are our life, then our ambition can indeed be to make peace, leading to an abundant harvest of righteousness.

Conclusion: Martin Luther described the life of discipleship this way in his book *On Christian Freedom*: "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one." As Christ declares us innocent, unbound, freed from the guilt and burden of sin, we are free from the condemnation that might be spoken – or even lived out – against us. And as we hear and respond to that verdict of "not guilty," we are remade in the image of Christ. Our old ambitions, self-directed, self-centered, self-oriented, are crucified with Christ as we repent of those sinful attitudes and actions. Our lives become refocused so that we concentrate on serving others freely and eagerly, as Christ Himself has served us. We can be ambitious in that sense, eager to bring every thought, every word, every action into captivity to the love of Jesus our Lord and Master, ambitious to bend our every effort to helping others see and honor and worship that Lord also. AMEN!

We make the next song our prayer, as we ask our Lord to fulfill our ambition. That ambition is no longer, "Make Me Rich" or "Make Me Successful" or "Make Me Happy" but it is this: "Make Me a Servant."