

SERMON: Ambition and Servanthood
TEXT: Mark 10:35-45

1.6 billion dollars. That's billion, with a B. This is the amount of the jackpot in the Mega Millions lottery. As the payout grows larger, so do the number of people willing to stand in line to buy a chance. This. Makes. No. Sense. Because the more tickets that are sold, the greater the odds against winning. Even if you were to win such a jackpot, you might be surprised to learn that instead of relieving you of all your problems, it only gives you more problems. Instead of being "set for life" many lottery winners have found that their winnings only set them up for failure.

One couple named Alex and Rhonda bought a lottery ticket when they had less than \$30 in their bank account. They won \$13 million, but it caused them to lose a lot of friends and family members. Within a few years, they filed for bankruptcy and were charged with tax fraud.

When another man won \$1.2 million annually, he purchased new cars and homes for family members and made large donations to feed the hungry. He enjoyed playing Santa Claus, but soon was under so much pressure from strangers asking for money, that he and his wife separated. Then, less than two years after

he hit the jackpot, he took his own life. (David, Sweet, *8 big lottery winners whose money and luck ran out*, www.bankrate.com October 16, 2018)

It's easy to imagine getting carried away with spending, and even donating, but it's hard to imagine *running out* of that much money. But it happens, more often than not. Winning the lottery seems like it would be a dream come true, but it ain't all it's cracked up to be.

Sure, I've dreamed about winning a lot of money, and I've even promised God that I would donate most of it if I did! But I don't play the lottery, so that makes my odds of winning extremely unlikely. And when I wake up from that dream, I tell myself, "be careful what you pray for."

As we read in the Gospel of Mark, this is basically how Jesus answered James and John when they made that bold and ambitious request, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

"You do not know what you are asking," Jesus countered. In other words, "Be careful what you pray for. It ain't all it's cracked up to be." He continued to

push them to think it through: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

But obviously, they were not thinking. “We are able,” they confidently pronounced. They are walking tall and feeling pretty good about themselves. Normally, we would applaud such self-esteem and self-confidence. On the other hand, we all know what happens when the star quarterback gets cocky and thinks he can win the game all by himself. The other players become resentful. And suddenly the team is no longer a team.

The ten other disciples became angry with James and John for their arrogance and selfish ambition, probably because they, too, were vying for position as the right-hand man for Jesus. But Jesus explained to all of them that being great has nothing to do with being in a high position, over and above someone else, or named the best of all the rest. “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

Jesus deals with them quite gently. Much more gently than God responded to Job in his bold complaint that God has been silent in the face of Job’s suffering.

God lets Job have it, firmly putting him in his place with a sarcastic diatribe that could be summarized with one question? “Who do you think you are?”

I really enjoy these verses from Job – probably more than I should. It’s refreshing, first of all, to know that God uses words just as effectively as plagues and wars to make a point. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.”

Also, I appreciate good sarcasm, and this passage drips with it. “Who determined its measurements – surely you know!”

And when my ambition gets the best of me, I realize God is speaking to me, and I can feel my enlarged head shrinking back down to size. I am humbled and grateful that God even bothers to speak to me. “Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together?”

With these very pointed questions delineating the position of humans in relation to God, my arrogant ambition turns to grateful servanthood.

Arlene is I woman I know from another church who is a servant in every sense of the word. She was shy, quiet, and unassuming. Invisible almost. But she was a workhorse, always behind the scenes, doing the hard jobs, the dirty jobs, the thankless jobs. If there was furniture to be moved so that the floors could be waxed, she was the first one to show up. Instead of waiting for others to arrive, she would get right to work, even moving the heavy pieces all by herself. Her days were spent volunteering – at the food bank and the food pantry. Instead of taking a break to sit and visit with other volunteers, Arlene would find more work to do, cleaning the bathrooms or rearranging the shelves. On the weekends she would often participate in various walks and runs to help raise funds for cancer or Alzheimer's or what have you. She didn't race to win any prize, only to support the cause. If anyone ever mentioned how much she did or how sacrificial she was, she would claim that it really wasn't that much. I think she even mentioned to me once that she worried she wasn't doing enough to follow Jesus.

Another person I think of as a true servant is former President Jimmy Carter. He is in his nineties and still volunteering, doing manual labor, building houses for Habitat for Humanity. Most people at that age would say that they've done their part – and most of us would agree with them! There's no doubt that Jimmy Carter is an ambitious person; you don't reach the highest office in the nation and the

most powerful position in the world without it. Yet, Carter's ambition was never for his own glory. His priority and purpose were always to serve God by serving others. An article I read indicated that throughout his term as President, he carried his own suitcases onto Air Force One and refused to have "Hail to the Chief" played when he entered a room.

Today, he and his wife Rosalynn live in their home town of Plains, Georgia – a town with a nearly 40% poverty rate. Their 2-bedroom, ranch style home is assessed at \$167,000 – less than the value of the armored Secret Service vehicles parked outside. Carter has used his post-presidency to support human rights, global health programs and fair elections worldwide through his Carter Center, based in Atlanta. He has helped renovate 4,300 homes in 14 countries for Habitat for Humanity, he travels by commercial airlines rather than private jets, and he teaches Sunday School every other Sunday. (Kevin Sullivan and Mary Jordan, *The Un-Celebrity President*, www.washingtonpost.com, August 17, 2018)

This is what I would call ambitious servanthood. When one who is first chooses to be last. When one in the spotlight chooses to shine the light on the needs of others. When one who could be king chooses to suffer and die, that the world might live. That we all might have life, and have it abundantly.

“James and John want glory,” wrote a contemporary theologian. “Jesus offers salvation. James and John want status. Jesus offers relationship. James and John want power. Jesus offers purpose. James and John want greatness. Jesus offers life. James and John want recognition. Jesus offers grace.... James and John... want to lord it over others. Jesus offers them, and us, the privilege of serving side by side, with him. We want to be first, but Jesus reminds us that we are closest to him when we are among the least and last and lost.” (Jill Duffield, *Looking into the Lectionary – Asking the wrong questions*, The Presbyterian Outlook, October 15, 2018)

In all our striving and seeking, may we follow Jesus into the world with ambition to serve in his name... to the glory of God!

AMEN.