

## **The Greatest of All**

### **Pentecost 20/Proper 24**

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

This past Wednesday, October 18, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that the population of the United States has reached the 300 million mark. Every seven seconds a person is born and twice that time someone dies. The cycle of birth and death marches on unbroken.

The average American can not be found in today's world. Average is such a neutral unappealing word found written in so many a description. Teachers and supervisors use the word in report cards and on evaluations. Telling someone in this society that they are average reduces people to less than what they truly are. In fact, I have never met an average person.

Our scriptures use the word great in all three readings to set a standard of true greatness. The gospel references “great ones” who lord it over others but these are not to be the model for greatness. Instead “greatness” is matched with servant hood.

Greatness is earned. As used in the quote from this morning's gospel, the word “great” is something to be desired and earned. Some may believe that people are born for greatness. Jesus clearly states that greatness is an act of the will to be first among one's peers. Yet greatness in Jesus mind is achieved by doing the opposite of what this world says it is. The world says that greatness is measured in how much power one has over others.

In reality, we as people of faith, have a better chance at becoming great by doing well at being average! In truth, I find that average people are a lot nicer to me. I find that average people are easier to get along with. I hope we hear today, that it's okay to be average. But those who would want to become first, better realize the price of being a servant of everyone else.

Let me quote to you the essay of a young man in high school that grew up to be one of our country's leaders. Whether he was great – you can decide:

"I am a person motivated and influenced by so many diverse forces I sometimes question the sanity of my existence. I am a living paradox-deeply religious, yet not as convinced of my exact beliefs as I ought

to be wanting responsibility yet shirking it; loving the truth but often times giving way to falsity. ... I detest selfishness, but see it in the mirror every day. ... I view those, some of whom are very dear to me, who have never learned how to live. I desire and struggle to be different from them, but often am almost an exact likeness. ... I, in my attempts to be honest, will not be the hypocrite I hate." –(William Jefferson Clinton, in a composition written in high school, cited in his book *My Life*, and excerpted in a feature length article in *The New Yorker* by David Remnick, "The Wanderer," September 18, 2006, 57).

If you guessed President William Jefferson Clinton wrote that composition, you were right. Was it a self-fulfilling prophecy? His honest struggles to be different became his legacy.

Jesus after two thousand years continues to give us a legacy of greatness that was born of humility, humble means with the uncanny ability to see greatness within the average person. The Lord made level the playing field in life. He took on the role first of teacher and master towards his disciples. In contrast to the honor given to rabbis in his day he taught them the greatest lesson he could teach by his own example by becoming slave of all. The chains of rejection and suffering he bore he gladly took in order that he might form within you and me a new man/a new woman/a new boy/a new girl.

Jesus story of the ordinary becoming extraordinary is retold through out history in the lives of those who sought to beat the law of averages. One book "The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans As Told by Themselves, was originally published in 1906 (and reissued [in 2000]). It collects interviews with a number of ordinary Americans - African-Americans, immigrants, factory and sweatshop workers, housewives and others. Their stories are, for the most part, unremarkable: how they got to the United States, what they do with their days, what their aspirations are, how they think of America and their homelands.

So what makes it such a favorite in book reviews? Precisely this: the stories are ordinary, reflecting the lives of most of the 30-odd millions of people who lived in this country at the turn of the 20th century. It's the poignancy of this ordinariness that gets to those who read this book - this is all they are, and *Undistinguished Lives* captures it all without any kind of denigration ....

"A marvelous little book . . . . With no varnish or self-pity, . . . people who never achieved anything notable (except decency and dignity) tell the stories of their lives. A Chinese laundry-man, a Polish

woman sweatshop worker, a farm wife--all considered themselves ordinary and all were extraordinary. Heroes come in a lot of funny shapes."

**Molly Ivins, *Ms Magazine***

"The so-called undistinguished Americans generally speak in their own words; at times their writing is rough-hewn, even mundane, but informed with the rousing emotions of immigrants trying to succeed in a new land, of native-born Americans struggling against the prejudices of their fellow countrymen. The book recreates a bygone era by serving up the stuff of day-to-day life." ***Publishers Weekly***  
Our Savior saved humanity from its own self-importance. He lifts people from a world that seeks to classify and pigeon-hole and tear down through destructive competition. When Jesus Christ lives his life in our own, our world ceases to be mundane and futile and desperate.

Through the model of the Suffering Servant people can hold their heads high with dignity and respect. By taking on his yoke the lives of ordinary people become great. The greatest of all is he or she who serves. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God! Amen.