

**Chapel Hill United Church of Christ**

**Sunday Sermon**

**Bottoms Up**

**September 20, 2009**

James 3: 13-18  
Mark 9: 30-37

Rev. Dr. Galen E. Russell III  
September 20, 2009

*He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."*

Prayer: In Christ, we have your wisdom, O God. May we deepen our understanding today. Amen.

This past Friday morning, "The Today Show" began by declaring that the show was a special "split" edition, meaning that part of it with Meredith Vierra was broadcasted from the New York studio, and the other part was broadcasted from Dallas Texas where Matt Lauer and Al Roker were in the new Dallas Cowboys stadium. Now that started to get me excited. NBC apparently felt that the new \$1.15 billion stadium was an important enough human achievement that it would broadcast the show from there, highlighting all the expensive, state of the art features. The old stadium cost \$35 million to build, which was a lot of money back in the 70's. The new stadium boasts the largest video screen in the world. It costs... \$42 million... and weighs more than a Boeing 747! Now, I'm really getting excited! I couldn't wait until Matt Lauer would interview Jerry Jones, the owner of the Dallas Cowboys to see what he had to say about this great, new state

of the art stadium!

You do great things, you are great, right? You spend great amounts of money, that makes you great, right? If something is REALLY expensive and costs a lot to build, it's a great, marvelous achievement, right?

Funny, scripture says something totally opposite. The opposite is found in numerous passages throughout the Bible, and today's passages give us two of those. James warns about wisdom born out of human ways of life. He pushes his readers/listeners to watch out for envy and selfish ambition. These lead to disorder and wickedness of every kind. He stresses a reversal of such wisdom, which is the wisdom of God. God's wisdom the opposite of human thinking. In God's perspective there is great virtue in gentleness, in a willingness to yield, in mercy, and peace. These are all good fruits, and all part of the harvest of righteousness.

Jesus speaks of greatness, too, only the disciples have deaf ears. They don't understand the great thing that is to happen to Jesus when he tells them that he is going to suffer and die, but that he will rise in three days. They can't see that, as an act of humble servanthood, this was an act of his greatness. They couldn't see God's wisdom and greatness in Jesus as the "suffering servant" (Isaiah 53).

The disciples *were* interested in greatness, however. They were arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest. But, Jesus turns their conventional, human

wisdom about greatness upside down. He says that God's wisdom reveals that the bottom of the heap is really the top of the heap! The last are really the first. The child is really the one who best illustrates who can enter the realm of God. The servant is really the greatest among all people.

There used to be a tribe of Native Americans who lived in the state of Mississippi, next to a very swift and dangerous river. The current was so strong that if somebody happened to fall in or stumbled into it they could be swept away downstream. One day the tribe needed to cross the rushing river in order to relocate. They decided that those who were strong would pick up the weak and put them on their shoulders; the little children, the sick, the old and the infirm. Those who were ill or wounded were carried on the backs of those who were strongest. They waded out into the river, and to their surprise they discovered that the weight on their shoulders by carrying the least and the lowest helped them to keep their footing in the strong current and enable them to make it safely across the river.

What Jesus is trying to teach the disciples about greatness, about servanthood, is reflected in this story. The lowest, the weak, the infirm of that Native American society were literally lifted up, carried by the strongest, who were now, literally on the bottom. The strongest had become the servants and were underneath the weak, and lo and behold, they found sure footing (Sermon Illustrations for September 20, [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com), retrieved September 15, 2009).

The bottom is flipped up, and there is sure footing there. The way to acquire greatness in God's perspective is to tend to the needs of others. That is sure footing. The antidote to a fixation of power, of prestige, of dominance, of authoritarianism, of a desire for expensive human achievements is to see life through the lens that a child might see life. That is sure footing.

How does this work in our lives? I think we see it at work as we endeavor to let go of a strong focus on self, and instead, have a strong focus on God. When we do that, the Spirit helps us bring in gentleness and mercy and hospitality toward others. We let God's wisdom enter our consciousness while simultaneously realizing that we are letting go of clinging strongly to human wisdom. Human wisdom tends to come as we grow older, but God's wisdom tends to need to be re-learned along the way.

I suggest that we, as people who are regularly re-learning the ways and wisdom of God, are on guard when culture focuses a lot on expressions of self-indulgence... like when congressman Joe Wilson shouted out disrespectfully during a presidential speech, or like when Kanye West grabbed the microphone from Taylor Swift at the MTV Video Music Awards to give us his opinion that Beyonce should have won ... or when self-aggrandizement happens, such as when a football player scores a touchdown these days.

But, while we are on guard about these kinds of human ways and wisdom, let us be sure to call attention to God's ways and wisdom when we see it in practice... when the bottom is flipped up and the high road of integrity is taken... like when Congressman Joe Wilson, prompted by other members of the House, apologized to President Obama who graciously accepted the apology... like when Beyonce graciously called out Taylor Swift and invited her to continue with her acceptance speech... or like when on Friday's news, I watched a high school player run for a touchdown, and he simply tossed the ball to the ref after he scored. No chest beating... no triumphant celebrations. Just, "Here's the ball, ref."

Friends, we can trust in the sure-footing provided for us from the wisdom of the scriptures. We will find integrity when we flip the bottom, servant-oriented, humble ideas to the top. We will find a harvest of righteousness when we receive the realm of God as a little child (Mark 10:15). This keeps God's wisdom and ways central and doesn't encourage the grabbing of greatness; rather it encourages us in carrying the presence of God as we do all that we do in Christ's name. Amen.