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## ***The Leadership/Martyr/Service Gates to Jesus***

I Corinthians 13

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Northway Christian Church, Dallas, Texas

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My mother died peacefully just a couple of hours after we got her home a week ago last Friday afternoon. Alert to what was happening; my two sisters and I joined hands and prayed as she took her leave of us. Spiritually we escorted her to the gates of heaven and there we let her go. It was what the Celtic Christians call a "*thin place*," or a "*thin moment*," when heaven and earth draw especially close together.

Before I left for my last few days with my mother, in the mail I received the galley proofs of a book that I have recently written and that is being published this summer by Chalice Press, our denominational publishing house. It was a very exciting moment for me; the fulfillment of a long-time dream. And I could hardly wait to get to California and show my book to my mother.

As you would expect, my mother was my greatest fan. She was the person most responsible for planting the seeds of ambition in my soul. She groomed me for excellence, and when achievements came to me, slowly and sometimes painfully, she was the first one there to hug me and say that she knew that I could do it all along. When I was 12 years old and received my call to ministry, my mother was the one person in my life that I confided in, and she didn't flinch. Instead she affirmed it fully and supported me completely as it unfolded. And with every step on the journey it was to her that I turned to share my trophies; and so it was that I wanted my mother to see my book. And in a lucid moment on the Thursday before she died, I got the opportunity, and she smiled that smile that I had sought and seen so many times before. I made my mother proud of me one last time before she died.

One of the Biblical texts that I lived with in the days of my mother's passing was the story of the ambition of John and James as Jesus made His way to Jerusalem for the last time. According to Mark's Gospel (10:35-45) it was the sons of Zebedee themselves who were vying for position, much to the irritation of the rest of the Apostles. "*Grant that we may sit in Your glory, one on Your right, and one on Your left,*" they asked Jesus (v. 37). But interestingly, in Matthew's version of this story, it was not John and James alone who made this request of Jesus, but their mother too (Matthew 20:20-28). And I like that detail; I know that woman; she was just like my mother.

Now, the fascinating thing to me in this narrative is that Jesus didn't scold John or James or their mother for being ambitious as you might expect. Jesus

didn't try to dampen their enthusiasm; instead He tried to re-channel it. Take another look at the Scriptural Sentence that we read together this morning as worship began: "*Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*" (Matthew 20:26-28). You see, the human desire to be "*great*" and "*first*" was not something that Jesus rejected. That's not something that we say very often or very clearly as Christians. In fact, the general impression is that Christianity frowns on achievement and accomplishment. The Gospel's very clear rejection of good works as the basis of our salvation has the unfortunate consequence of fostering spiritual sloth and mediocrity in those who follow Jesus Christ by faith. And this has been used effectively against us.

Back in Seminary I was told that to be spiritually honest I had to know the best arguments of historic Christianity's severest critics. We who are Christians have got to honestly grapple with the element of truth in what our critics say about us (Kung 317). And so it was that I began my uneasy acquaintance with Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19<sup>th</sup> century radical German philosopher who not only wrote the book entitled The Antichrist, but who has sometimes even been called "*the Antichrist*."

The son and grandson of Lutheran ministers who was called "*the little pastor*" himself while growing up, Friedrich Nietzsche became one of the harshest critics of conventional, middle-class "*churchianity*" of all times. He had lots of complaints against Christianity, not the least of which was the way that he believed that the Gospel produced a class of weak, soft, slow and silly people. He argued that instead of pushing us toward something "*better, stronger or higher*" as human beings, that the Gospel "*wages a deadly war*" against the desire and drive to change things for the better. He said that "*Christianity has sided with all that is weak and base, with all failures; it has made an ideal of whatever contradicts the instinct of the strong life*" (The Antichrist). And so, in place of conventional Christianity and mediocre Christians, Nietzsche proposed the ideal of the "*Übermensch*" (literally "*a Super Person*"), a new kind of human being: strong, courageous, ambitious, and bold; everything he thought Christians were not. Is there truth in this criticism? Eberhard Arnold certainly thought so.

Eberhard Arnold was one of the great Christian thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and he wrote his doctoral dissertation on Nietzsche. And while he was not uncritical of his thinking, Eberhard Arnold nevertheless had a genuine appreciation for Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity. In fact, he agreed completely with Nietzsche's observation that conventional Christianity has produced generation after generation of spiritually lazy people. A saying often attributed to Nietzsche goes something like this: "*I might believe in the Redeemer if His followers looked more Redeemed.*" And this is the seed of truth that Eberhard Arnold latched onto from the teachings of Nietzsche.

You see, Biblically there is more to being a Christian than just believing in Jesus. To be a Christian involves following Him; obeying Him; even imitating Him. And so Eberhard Arnold took Nietzsche's notion of the "*Übermensch*," the "*Super Person*," and applied it to Jesus Christ. He said that Jesus is the

*“redeeming man of great and overcoming love, the creative spirit, the noontide bell that calls for a great decision, the one who sets people’s will free again, who brings the earth back to its true purpose and restores hope to humanity”* (Baum 57). And to be a Christian, he said, is orient ourselves to greatness by embodying His Spirit, embracing His agenda and following His example.

Nietzsche was exactly right; it’s about those who are following the Redeemer looking more redeemed. And this is what Jesus told John and James and their mother when they voiced their ambition to Him. Jesus didn’t scold them for wanting to be great or first, He just wanted to make sure that they understood how they would get there: *“Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant; and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave to all; for the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:43-45). The world needs Christians who are aiming at greatness, and Christ has told us what greatness means for a Christian.

In your sermon notes this morning there is a diagram of the gates into the city of Jerusalem as it is described in Nehemiah chapter 3. Nehemiah was known as the restorer of the walls of Jerusalem. After the Babylonian captivity, it was Nehemiah who led the reconstruction of the defenses of Jerusalem. And in Nehemiah chapter 3 we are told about the ten gates that were built into the walls that were being restored: the Sheep Gate, the Fish Gate, The Old Gate, the Valley Gate, the Dung Gate, the Fountain Gate, the Water Gate, the Horse Gate, the East Gate and the Inspection Gate. For many interpreters the lure of allegory is just too great with a text like this, and so they make elaborate connections between each one of these ten gates and some imagined aspect of Christianity. My mind doesn’t work like that. Instead of seeing different aspects of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in each one of these ten gates, what I see is that there was more than one way into the city of Jerusalem in Nehemiah’s day. And this seems to be the same point that John makes in his Revelation when he sees the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven (chapter 21). It had twelve gates; three to the north, three to the south, three to the west and three to the east. Again those given to allegory love to speculate about their meanings. I just take them to mean that there’s more than one way in. And this is what we’ve been talking about here at Northway since Easter.

I believe that the scriptures teach that there’s only one Savior, Jesus Christ, crucified, raised and glorified. And this means that anybody who is finally saved will finally be saved through what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. But we don’t all come to Jesus in the same way. There are different gates through which we pass into His saving presence. Those who are bound and tormented by evil can pass through the Deliverance and Transformation Gates. Those who battle brokenness and pain can pass through the Suffering Gate. Those who feel contained and condemned can pass through the Cleansing and Forgiveness Gates. Those who feel alienated and long for reconciliation can pass through the Peace and Family Gates. And for those who are longing for purpose and are aspiring to greatness, there are the Leadership, Martyrdom and Service Gates through which they can pass into the presence of Jesus Christ.

You see, the Gospel of Jesus Christ proves adequate at the point of all of our hurts and hopes as human beings. We can bring Him our deepest wounds and know that He will heal them. But we can also bring Him our highest aspirations and know that He will help us to achieve them. Christ is the answer to the question of our significance as human beings. The great and wise Rabbi Abraham Heschel once observed that –

*There is not a soul on this earth which, however vaguely or rarely, has not realized that life is dismal if not mirrored in something which is lasting. We are all in search of a conviction that there is something which is worth the toil of living. There is not a soul which has not felt the craving of something that outlasts life, (its) strife and agony.*

And then he asked –

*What is the lasting in our own lives?  
What remains constant through all the changes?  
What does a man, looking back from the threshold of death, consider lasting in all that has happened and passed?*

And the Gospel's answer is as clear as it is familiar. We heard it in our Scripture lesson this morning. There are lots of things that will not last; but there are three things that will – faith, hope and love. Faith refers to your life's most basic trust. Hope refers to your life's most basic confidence. Love refers to your life's most basic commitment. And greatness for the Christian lies in the deliberate cultivation of these three virtues in our imitation of Jesus Christ.

Nietzsche's critique of Christianity can only be answered by Christians like us sitting here this morning deciding that we are going to be truly, fully and only Christian. As Sheldon Vanauken put it: *"The best argument for Christianity is Christians; ...but the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians"* (Aldrich 21). And this is why I'd just love to see what Nietzsche would do with Mother Teresa.

Not soft, slow or silly, Mother Teresa was strong, courageous, ambitious and bold; in other words, an *"ubermensch,"* a super person, a spiritual giant. And whenever she was asked to explain herself and her work, she simply answered, *"I'm just trying to do something beautiful for God"* (Muggeridge 97). And friends, if we made that our goal too, then Jesus Christ would be taken more seriously by the world around us. *"Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant; and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave to all; for the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"*

## Sources

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