

***“From Ambition to Apostleship”*** - Text(s): Luke 9:51-62  
- Pastor Ken Nelson

In a book of his entitled, *“The Applause of Heaven”*, Christian pastor and author Max Lucado writes on the distinction between ambition that leads to excellence and ambition that mutates into a thirst for personal power. Pastor Lucado writes, *“The desire for excellence is a gift from God, much needed in every society. It is characterized however by respect for quality and a yearning to use God’s gifts in a way that pleases him. There is a canyon of difference then, between doing your best to glorify God, and doing whatever it takes to promote yourself.”*

Today’s lesson from Luke puts that important distinction in plain view. James and John, not far removed by the way from a mission journey in which Jesus had instructed them to gently *‘shake the dust from their feet’* from any towns that did not receive their message, now wanted to *‘grind a town into the dust’* because it would not receive their Lord. They mistakenly believe Jesus’ presence is now a call to judgment, a green light for calling down fire from heaven, turning critics into crispy fried chicken. But what they discover, whether they like it or not, is that Jesus wills salvation and forbearance, not annihilation and expulsion.

Now I would be less than honest with you if I were to say that God is against ambition and zeal; quite the contrary God suppresses neither. God does not tamp down our imaginations, prohibit us from excellence, and is not envious of our achievements. But God does acquaint us in this lesson with the dangers of “ambition,” and its antithesis, “apathy,” and points us in our lesson to faithful “apostleship.” Let’s look at ambition for a moment. In our lesson, it manifests itself as *“getting the last word,”* bringing about compliance through coercion. James and John remind us of much of the church in history. We don’t always see eye to eye in the church, we differ, especially today on matters of biblical interpretation and Christian life. Such matters are leading to division in the church, with different sides calling some fire down on the other.

Ambition and zeal for correct teaching and practice of Christianity is as important to me as anybody. Of late, over matters relating to sexuality, the members and churches of our ELCA have staked sides. We’ve got folks using “doctrinal purity” to roast others who fire back with demands for “church-wide unity.” When pressed by James and John, our Lord simply “moved on”, passing through the towns that so infuriated his followers, presumably inviting the lot of them to look inside a bit. Jesus pressed on, toward Jerusalem, the cross, reminding us to temper our ambition whenever and however it gets in the way of Christian apostleship.

The other side of ambition of course is apathy, likewise on display in our lesson today. In three encounters upon leaving the towns of Samaria Jesus encounters people who want to follow, but again, on their own terms. Some don’t wish to count the cost of faith. Jesus reminds them it will involve sacrifice, one doesn’t get too settled in when they choose to heed the words *“follow me.”* The gospel of Jesus Christ is absent of and the kingdom of God a stranger to some of the ideals of prosperity so often expressed today in real and digital pulpits.

Likewise the gospel of Jesus Christ is absent of and the kingdom of God a stranger to post modern ideals of “blended” religion, where a little of this and a little of that makes for an enticing taste to the spiritual palate. The Bible as written word is revealed truth, not a cookbook,

with suggestions for special occasions. Jesus can't be plated and judged on taste, texture, and presentation. Quite the contrary, the gospel of Jesus is an exclusive word, a searing challenge to virtually every cultural assumption. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not some "secret ingredient" for religious chefs to work into an innovative way to put before a panel of judges. Follow me, means follow me now, and follow me like this. Face forward, eyes wide open, cross front and center, ambition squarely on reaching anyone who will give the gospel an audience.

Blayne Greiner was Senior Pastor of a growing church in large urban area on the West Coast. By his own admission, he had the ambition of James and John to make his congregation click, with innovative and effective ministries. Today, he is known simply as "*pastor to the Goths.*" No, Goth's are not a prominent West Coast family, their those people in the 13-30 age range with shaved heads, lots of pierced body parts, and that Johnny Cash look...all dressed in black. Goth's listen to music that taunts everything mainstream in America. They are at best suspicious of Jesus Christ and totally put off by Christianity. Pastor Greiner first noticed them congregating in his church parking lot, and when they noticed his Wednesday night youth group coming and going, they shot a few taunts their way, and a lot of nasty looks.

What better time than for a Senior Pastor to call some fire down from heaven or at least call the police...right? Instead, he went out, shook a few hands, offered up some pop, and chilled out with the Goths. Wasn't long, and his parking lot was hosting maybe a 100 of the "black clad demons." That's when some of his "registered" congregation started getting nervous...and soon thereafter fed up. Ministry to these guys was good in theory, but wouldn't pay the mortgage. The Goth's were about to feel some heat...and knew it. So they moved on. But this time an ambitious Christian moved with them...Blayne Greiner. They meet in parking lots...outside and occasionally inside bars...but they meet. Some of them are now "Christian Goth's." Most still aren't.

Seems being kicked off church property or overlooked in church ministries seldom converts anyone to the cause of Christ. "*I took a chance,*" Blayne said. "*I'd say it has been worth it,*" Ya think? AMEN