



Reaching for the Stars



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
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<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018-01-21-AWW.mp3>.

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Grace Episcopal Church
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January 21, 2018

Mark 1:14-20

In his most recent book, the Pulitzer Prize winning author and historian, David McCullough, poses the question: "*Why do some men reach for the stars and so many others never look up?*"

McCullough has spent a lifetime narrating the American story, in books like: *The Great Bridge, The Wright Brothers, Truman and John Adams*; and as part of his work, McCullough has closely studied our nation's leaders, the good ones and the not-so-good ones.

As we all know, there have been Presidents, Senators and Congressmen, who were uninspiring and unimaginative, individuals with no vision, no passion, no courage or humility, people who were willing to settle for the status quo rather than reach for something greater, who cared more about themselves and their own well-being, than they did for the fellow citizens. But, our country has also been the birthplace of exceptional men and women, leaders of eloquence and stature, who inspired us and challenged us, calling us to break new boundaries and new frontiers, inviting us to embody our highest ideals of liberty and justice, equality and opportunity, leaders who instilled in us a desire to be the best we can be, as a people and a nation.

It was after studying this wide variety of leadership, across the 200-plus years of our nation's history, that McCullough was left wondering: What makes the difference between a good leader and a mediocre one? Between someone who is willing to take risks and someone who plays it safe? Between a person dreams of a better world and a person who settles for the way things are? "*Why do some men reach for the stars and so many others never look up?*"

Ever since reading that question, I haven't been able to shake it. It's been running around in my head, and I've been thinking a lot about Jesus, because if you look at Jesus' life and ministry, if you look at his leadership and what he was all about, it's pretty clear Jesus reached for the stars.

Jesus came of age during the Roman occupation of Israel, and at a time when Jewish society was sharply divided, religiously, and socially, and economically. At the top of the pyramid were the Romans, followed by the Jewish leaders, the Chief Priest and elders, and the wealthy merchants in Jerusalem. As you can probably imagine, they all had it pretty good at the time, because they had the money, the power, and control.

Far below those at the top were the people like Jesus, people from small towns, farmers and craftsmen, people who were barely scraping by and just hoping to make ends meet, and below even them, at the very, very bottom, were the old and the sick, the women and the children. For these people, the ones on the lowest rung, life itself was always in question because they had no way to support themselves. They had no work, no opportunities, no standing or status whatsoever. They always had to depend on others, and so every day was a fight for survival, a fight for food, for shelter, for health, a fight for respect and dignity. For those people, life was harsh and unforgiving.

But, Jesus believed things could be different.

Jesus had this vision for what he called the kingdom of God, and it's what life would be like on earth if God were in control rather than the Romans, or Jewish authorities, or anyone else for that matter. It's what life would be like if everyone was seen and heard for who they were, what life would be like if love, and compassion, and mercy were more valued than money or power, armies or weapons.

The kingdom of God was at the heart of Jesus' message. The very first words he spoke in the Gospel of Mark were about the kingdom of God, and he embodied its ideals with every word and every action. You could see it in the way he reached out to sinners and outsiders; the way he surrounded himself with the people who were excluded and rejected; the way he cared for the broken and suffering, the lost and the lonely. And, you could hear it in his voice, in the way he spoke to people.

People were always coming up to Jesus, particularly those at the bottom of the pyramid, looking for hope or for healing, and Jesus always had something to offer, a word or a phrase:

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.

Just as you do to the least of these, you do to me.

Let him who is without sin, cast the first stone.

The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

*Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your mind, and love you neighbor as yourself.*

Jesus lived in such a way that people really believed him when he spoke about God's love, because they could see it in him, and hear it in him. Jesus made the kingdom of God feel real for everyone.

To be a follower of Jesus is to live our lives as Jesus did. It's about seeing other people the way God sees them. It's about living with our hearts open wide, living with passion and conviction, caring more about other people than we do about ourselves. It's about dreaming of a better world and doing something to make that dream real. It's about reaching for the stars when others are even looking up.

We all know of people who lived that way, people of vision and faith, who wanted nothing more than to make their neighborhoods, and communities, and country a better place to live. Some of these people may be well-known, names with which we are all familiar, but many of them are known only to us. All of them, though, touched our lives and brought the kingdom of God a little closer.

Last week, for example, I finally saw the movie *Marshall*, about the early career of Supreme Court Justice, Thurgood Marshall. Set in 1941, at a time when Marshall was the only lawyer working for the NAACP, the movie focused on a case in Connecticut, in which a black man was charged with raping a white woman.

Marshall travelled to Bridgeport to represent the man, but because he wouldn't be admitted to the Connecticut bar, Marshall had to work with another lawyer, a Jewish man named Sam Friedman. Friedman had absolutely had no criminal case experience, and Marshall wasn't allowed to speak in court, so he had to guide Friedman through every step of the case, but together, they made a formidable team, these two outside-siders fighting the systemic injustices of the time, challenging the WASP's fraternity of Connecticut law.

It wasn't long before the pair exposed major holes in the prosecutor's case, thereby showing their client was innocent, and as the proceedings came toward a close, Marshall was called to Mississippi to handle another case, this one involving a lynching of a young man. As he and Friedman had dinner at the train station, just before his departure, Marshall said, "You know, I need an army of lawyers just like you, Sam. Lawyers who don't even know they want to make a difference, but with a little bit of training, can be just as capable as me."

Friedman smiled as he took in Marshall's compliment. "Until then, what?" Friedman asked. "You just travel around the country on this crusade, putting out fires in Mississippi, and Oklahoma, and Bridgeport?"

And Marshall said: "It's not really fires I'm after, Sam. It's justice."

Here at Grace, we continue in that long line of faithful Christians, doing our small part to share God's grace with those around us and make this community and this world a better place. Our Vision is to be that "city on a hill" where people of all races and culture can come to build their relationships with God and others, and I'm proud to say: we're living into that Vision, beginning on Sunday mornings, with our music and worship, when people from different backgrounds come together as one community, and continuing all week long through our many different ministries. In the last year alone, we began a ministry for racial justice, a ministry to bring a refugee family to the United States, and a new Sunday afternoon worship service. What's happening here is impressive...

But, we are only doing what Grace Church has always done.

Just over sixty-five years ago, a parishioner named Alice Maud Jones began collecting unwanted clothes from other church members. She would take those clothes, put them in her car, and drive around Montgomery County; and, when she saw someone in need of those clothes, she would give them out. Her ministry eventually became the Pennyworth Shop, which celebrates its 65th anniversary this year, the longest, ongoing ministry of Grace, and if you take a moment to think about every article of clothing the Pennyworth Shop has given out since Alice Maud Jones began, that's how many lives we've touched. I don't know if it's Is it thousands, or tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands, but I do know it's a lot. And, we're only getting started.

"Why do some men reach for the stars and so many others never look up?"

We do it, because Jesus did it. Amen.