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Mark 3:20-35
June 10, 2018

THE G.O.A.T.

How about those Warriors?!!! In honor of their SWEEP I want to begin with a basketball story. It is about Michael Jordan, perhaps the greatest professional basketball player of all time.

One night he scored sixty-nine points in a single game. In that same game, then rookie Stacey King made his inauspicious debut. He shot just one free throw, but he made it.

After the final buzzer, a reporter asked King for his thoughts on the game. Stacey King, with tongue planted firmly in his cheek, replied:

“I’ll always remember this as the night that Michael Jordan and I combined for 70 points.”

Well, I guess that is one way to look at it.

Michael Jordan was a great basketball player. And yet John Eliot, in his book titled *Overachievement*, claims that Michael Jordan was not really a very gifted basketball player. I’m not sure I would agree.

However, did you know that Michael Jordan was cut from his Junior High basketball team?

He only averaged 17 points a game in college. He wasn’t a very good rebounder.

At the end of his career, he never ranked first in any all-time major NBA statistic.

Still, by most he is considered the GOAT (greatest of all time), although you may get a little debate from LeBron James fans, Kevin Durrant fans, and maybe even Steph Curry fans.

So, how did Michael Jordan get to be a five-time NBA MVP, not to mention earn the reputation as the best hoops player on the planet?

Passion? Confidence? Determination? All of these were involved, of course.

Michael Jordan simply set out to be the best he could be ... and the rest, as they say, is history.

There is a part of almost everyone that is thrilled when someone attempts to reach lofty goals.

The pioneer, the successful entrepreneur, the victorious athlete, all speak to us about the ability of the human spirit to achieve monumental accomplishments ... when properly motivated.

Vicariously, we share in their achievements and find hope for our own lives in their successes.

President John F. Kennedy's hero was his grandfather, and he loved to hear stories about his grandfather's boyhood in Ireland.

One of these stories concerned how Grandfather Fitzgerald used to walk home from school each day with a group of friends.

Sometimes these boys would challenge each other to climb over the stone walls along the lanes of the countryside.

However, there were times when young Fitzgerald and the other boys were sometimes hesitant to dare the hazardous climbs it took to get over the wall.

So, they devised a way to motivate themselves to take the risk involved: they would toss their hats over the wall.

You see, they knew that they dare not go home without their hats, so then they had to climb over the walls to get them.

They tossed their hats over the wall as a way of motivating themselves to take a risk.

A poet said, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" And it is true.

There are times when all of us long to toss our hats over the wall.

There are times when we hunger in our own way for the heroic, whether we want to change jobs, start our own business, go back to school, retire, or whatever.

There come those times in life when we feel the need to make a change.

I know of one young man in particular who decided to make such a change.

He was thirty years old at the time, and he owned a successful small business which had been left to him by his father.

He was secure, he was liked and respected by his friends and neighbors, and he was meeting his responsibilities.

But he knew that this was not where he belonged. He felt called to a ministry, a ministry of teaching and preaching and healing.

And so, he threw his hat over the wall.

At first, he met with spectacular success, and his reputation spread with amazing speed.

But as his popularity increased, so did the number of his critics, especially in his home town.

Some of his closest friends tried to dissuade him from his insanity, and his family was also concerned for him.

But he persevered in his new calling for three years, only to die an untimely death.

No reasonable person would have judged his life to be a success.

But it was. It was the most successful life ever lived. For all of this took place around Nazareth more than 2000 years ago.

If anyone has a claim to be the GOAT – Jesus did. Jesus tossed his hat over the wall, and you and I are thankful that he did. And he modeled for us what the life of adventure should truly be.

Early in the twentieth century the world thrilled as Colonel Charles Lindbergh flew his little sprucewood plane solo across the Atlantic.

As he was leaving the last stretches of land in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, he kept looking down on the forests and lakes and valleys and thinking that if an emergency arose he would land in that little clearing beside the river, or he would clear that little clump of trees and land in that lake.

But soon there were no more clearings, no more clumps of trees only ocean. His hat was over the wall.

Doesn't it make your blood run faster, to know that there are people who have charted a heroic course for their lives and seen it through?

There are times in everyone's life when they need to toss their hat over the wall.

Of course, no one has ever accomplished anything of note without critics.

Toss your hat over a wall and you learn very quickly who your true friends are.

Winston Churchill, truly a man of heroic stature, was one of the most criticized politicians who ever lived. But he knew how to handle his detractors.

Perhaps the most famous of Churchill's exchanges was one he had at a state dinner with Nancy Astor, whose own reputation for acid wit and instant repartee was considerable.

During this dinner Lady Astor was compelled to listen to Churchill expound his views on a great number of subjects, all of them at odds with her own strongly held views.

Finally, no longer able to hold her tongue, she spat, "Winston, if you were my husband, I would flavor your coffee with poison."

To which Churchill immediately replied, "Madam, if I were your husband, I should drink it."

Certainly, Jesus had his critics.

In today's lesson from Mark's Gospel, Jesus is still in the early part of his ministry. However, people are starting to take note of him.

He has chosen his twelve disciples who will carry on the work after he is gone and the crowds are growing larger. Momentum is building toward an amazing ministry.

But almost immediately, he runs into opposition.

First of all, it was from his own family. Mark tells us that when Jesus' family heard about what was happening, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

Can you imagine that? Jesus' own family wanted him to shut down his ministry and come home.

But, isn't this the way life is? Sometimes, it is those closest to us who have the hardest time coming to grips with our dreams and aspirations.

Or it may come from colleagues.

In Jesus' case, it was the teachers of the law who had come down from Jerusalem.

With a poisonous sneer they greeted his teachings like this, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the ruler of demons he casts out demons."

Isn't that the way of it? Start to make waves and somebody will try to wrest the oars out of your hands by belittling your work.

One author has called this the "Salk Theory."

Jonas Salk, that great doctor of medicine who pioneered polio research and discovered the Polio Vaccine, had a legion of critics he dealt with over the years.

At one point, he made an interesting observation about the nature of criticism, which seems to hold true for any person who is successfully innovative.

"First," he said, "people will tell you that you are wrong. Then they will tell you that you are right, but what you're doing really isn't important.

"Finally, they will admit that you are right and that what you are doing is very important; but after all, they knew it all the time."

We all have our critics.

Maybe, the best way to answer your critics is to do as the builder of the Panama Canal did.

He had to endure carping criticisms from countless busybodies back home who predicted that he would never complete his great task.

But the resolute builder pressed steadily forward in his work and said nothing.

One of his subordinates, irritated by the flak they were receiving, asked the great engineer if he was ever going to answer his critics.

“In time,” he said, “when the canal is finished.”

There comes a time when we toss our hats over the wall in spite of everything the critics have to say.

Nothing is ever accomplished by people who value comfort and safety and acceptance above all else. There comes a time for what is often called a leap of faith.

Of course, the greatest adventure that one can start out on is that of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Now it is unfortunate that, for the most part, that statement will fall on deaf ears.

All too often we confuse discipleship with membership in the church. Or we confuse discipleship with respectability.

But, there is no particular risk involved in being respectable or belonging to a church.

To become a disciple of Jesus Christ, to move from a nominal belief to a radical conviction, to move from a nodding acquaintance with God to a complete commitment of one's life ...

... that is more of a challenge than digging a canal, or finding a cure for polio, or being the best basketball player in the world.

I was reading about Noel Paul Stookey's conversion to Jesus Christ. Some of you might know of Stookey by the beautiful wedding song that he wrote:

*He is now to be among you at the calling of your hearts
Rest assured this troubadour is acting on His part.*

*The union of your spirits, here, has caused Him to remain
For whenever two or more of you are gathered in His name
There is Love, there is Love.*

Others of you might know Paul Stookey as the second member of the folk singing trio, "Peter, Paul and Mary."

At one point in his life, Stookey was going through a time of searching and crisis. He was disturbed by the hypocrisy in his life.

And he turned to an old Greenwich Village friend named Bob Dylan for advice.

Two things that Dylan said stood out in Stookey's mind: One, go for a long walk in the country, two, and read the Bible.

Paul took the advice. He walked in the country, and it helped him sort out his priorities. And he read the Bible.

Although his folk group had sung several spirituals and gospel tunes, Stookey had never opened a Bible before.

But now he read through the entire New Testament and even parts of the Old. He admitted that he had a hard time with some of it: it was slow and often mysterious. Tell me about it!

But something real happened in Paul Stookey's life then, and today he is living as a disciple of Jesus Christ. His hat is over the wall.

Isn't it time for some of us to toss our hat over the wall?

A certain high jumper was referring to a world record he set in his sport. He said he threw his heart over the bar and the rest of him followed.

Perhaps you and I need to throw our hearts over the altar, so that we may follow.

It is exciting to read about the early days of Jesus' ministry. He had his critics, of course. But he never let them detract him from his call.

His life is a challenge to our lives.

It is time for us to toss our hat over the wall as well.

Amen!