

Sermon 09-01-2019

Some of you may remember when Howard K. Smith was the co-anchor of the ABC Evening News along with Barbara Walters. In his post as a network news analyst Smith had the opportunity to interview some of our society's most fascinating people, as well as various Presidents. Yet in spite of having a job that most of us would consider high status, he complained that his children never considered him very "hip," as we used to say back in those days. But then came the party conventions of 1964.

Smith was sent to San Francisco to cover one of those conventions for ABC. His family joined him later for a tour of California's sights, which included a visit to a new amusement park called *Disneyland*. The kids were most excited at the prospect of running into their idol, Mickey Mouse. The family spent the day riding all the rides and sampling the various treats. Then, as they wandered through the park, they happened upon their hero himself, Mickey. Suddenly, the life-sized rodent stared in surprise and exclaimed in a squeaky voice, "It's Howard K. Smith!" Smith reports that his young daughter suddenly looked at him with a new admiration and respect. Her dad had been recognized by Mickey Mouse, and this raised his stature considerably in her eyes.

Smith glowed in the face of this new-found status. But as he reflected on the incident, he realized that it was frivolous to base his standing on the words of a cartoon mouse. We'd all like to be recognized, wouldn't we, even if it's only by Mickey Mouse? It's one of the most human of desires. We all want to be somebody.

Bernie Madoff committed the largest financial fraud in U.S. history. Prosecutors estimated the size of the "take" to be nearly \$65 billion. Yes, that's "billion" with a "b." He lost everything dear to him— a son committed suicide, his family and friends turned their backs on him. He was stripped of all his wealth— his yachts, his private jet, his homes in exotic locations, everything that gave him a sense of place in the world. And on June 29, 2009, at age 71, Bernie Madoff, the man who seemingly had it all, was sentenced to 150 years in prison, the maximum the law allowed.

Obviously greed played a role, but it wasn't the key factor. According to one biographer Bernie Madoff's driving motivation was to gain recognition. He wanted to be somebody. As a young person Bernie never stood out. He wasn't smart enough in school . . . not athletic enough . . . not handsome enough . . . not articulate enough. He was rejected by one girl after another. He was a nobody as far as standards of human worth go. He seemed to have only one gift. He excelled at making money, especially, using other people's. And he used that gift to obtain the recognition he so desired.

Unfortunately, it was not the kind of recognition anyone would want. The recognition gained by running the world's largest "Ponzi scheme" only destroyed him and destroyed many of those around him. My guess is that deep down most people long to be somebody.

Jesus understood that. Jesus was a master at understanding human behavior. He knew that all of us crave recognition. He knew that the desire for status is an innate part of the human condition. Most of us don't want simply to keep up with the Joneses; we want to be slightly ahead of the Joneses, the Smiths and everyone else on the block. It is very human to want to be one-up on our associates.

There was a Harvard study where they asked students, "If prices were the same, which option would you choose— Option A—you make \$50,000 per year and everybody else makes \$25,000 per year; or Option B—you make \$100,000 per year, but everybody else makes \$200,000 per year?" Which option do you think the majority chose? They chose Option A. They would rather make \$50,000 and everyone else make \$25,000

than make \$100,000 and have everyone else make \$200,000. That says something about human nature, doesn't it? Status is at least as powerful a motivator as money. That's true today. It was true 2,000 years ago. Jesus knew that, and he saw an opportunity to use that very natural craving for recognition to teach us some very useful lessons.

One Sabbath, Jesus went to eat at the house of a prominent Pharisee. When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them a parable—*“When someone invites you to a wedding feast,”* he said, *“do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

I can almost see the smile on Jesus' face as he tells it. You see, in Jesus' day money wasn't the primary motivating factor in people's lives. The dominant value was prestige. Seating at banquets or gatherings was already predetermined according to the social status of the invited guests. Everyone had an established place on the social ladder. Where you sat at dinner indicated your standing. At a formal banquet, it would be absolutely humiliating to be asked to move to the foot of the table. It's silly, of course, but it's important to some people. When asked about seating important guests, Baron Rothschild's answer was, “Those that matter won't mind where they sit, and those who do mind, don't matter.”

Obviously Jesus was not interested in helping his disciples win at the status game; however, he knew, how potent is this drive to be No. 1. We all want to be recognized. We all want to be appreciated. Jesus understood that. So he gave his disciples this bit of advice about taking a lesser seat so that you might be moved up to a greater seat.

Jesus followed this very practical lesson with another. Turning to the host of the banquet, Jesus said, *“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

If you really want to make your life count, you won't do it by playing silly games of status and recognition. You'll quit worrying about what kind of car you drive or wearing the latest fashions or even how spacious your house is. No, the driving force in your life will be being more like Christ and making the world better for all people. Jesus is giving us a lesson about how to make our lives really count. It's not whether you sit at the head table. It's not whether the *maitre d'* at the finest restaurant in town knows you by name. It's where you'll sit at the final banquet Christ has prepared for all his saints.

Those places are reserved for people with compassionate hearts who are willing to do more than give sympathetic nods to those who are hurting, but will also offer a sympathetic hand. In the long run of things, it doesn't matter if the cartoon character at the amusement park recognizes you, or even if the President recognizes you. When the final day comes, will God recognize you? That's really all that matters.