

“I’m gonna live forever, I’m gonna learn how to fly. I feel it coming together,  
People will see me and cry...I’m gonna make it to heaven, light up the sky like a flame,  
I’m gonna live forever, Baby remember my name...”

This coming Friday, a new movie will be released that I’m sure will be a hit with the exceptionally talented high schoolers of St. David’s. Who knows when or if it will actually come to Page. And if recent history is any indication, even when it is supposed to play here, the movie might not arrive. So perhaps it will be worth our while to make a church trip to go see it in Flag or St. George. The movie I am speaking of is called *Fame*. Yes, those of us who go back a generation or two remember a movie of the same name. This is a remake of that 1980 film. Both the older and new version of *Fame* follow an amazingly gifted group of dancers, singers, actors and artists at The New York High School for the Performing Arts. We watch as they strive through hard work, dedication and determination to be the very best they can be, hoping against hope that they will be good enough that they can, as the song says, live forever.

*Fame* is not just about over-achieving high school students. I believe its popularity endures, not only because we can all relate to it, but because it is, on some level, our story. It speaks not only of striving for greatness, but also to our deepest fears and desires. The themes it explores touch on the very heart of what it means to be human, and the struggle all of us have coming to terms with the temporary nature of

our lives and what we should do about that. In some ways, I would describe it as a religious movie, because it explores the philosophical questions that religion hopes to answer. What is our role in life and what are we supposed to accomplish? What can we do to offset the fleeting nature of life? What does it mean for a human being to achieve greatness and can we attain eternal life through some measure of fame during our life? In short, can we live forever, if we work hard enough?

These questions posed in the movie are the same ones that humans have struggled with since the beginning of history. I have no doubt that if the disciples in today's Gospel saw it, the cultural differences would fade away as they realized that these kids are facing the same questions they are struggling with in today's text. Even the author of our Hebrew Bible text could not help but see the similarity. Like the characters in the movie, he also struggles with the temporary nature of life and whether we can do anything about it. He too, begins with his own lyric in today's lesson, though it is a bit more cynical than the lyrics to the song Fame. "Short and sorrowful is our life," we hear, "and there is no remedy when a life comes to an end, and no one has been known to return from Hades." Translated into the coarse language of our own culture today, basically he says, "Life's a bitch, then you die." Then in our Gospel, Jesus begins by announcing his own premature death. Meanwhile, the disciples, apparently completely missing Jesus's point, continue their own fame discussion, trying to figure out who among them is the greatest, who among them will achieve the most fame, who among them is going to live forever.

Struggling with the transitory nature of life and the need to make a mark on this

world before it is too late, is therefore obviously not something discovered in 1980. In fact, achieving greatness may have been an even more important goal in the first century than it is for us now. For a Roman citizen, striving to attain excellence was the central motivation in life. Sometimes in that time we hear it called achieving greatness, but it was also referred to as seeking honor. Honor was in fact, THE core value in Roman society, both philosophically and religiously. Just like in the movie *Fame*, Romans believed that the people in their society who held the most honor, would live forever by being remembered for every generation to come. It was eternal life for them. The same held true for Jews in that society, where, as we learned last week, even Jesus was concerned with honor, with what other people thought of him. “Who do they say that I am?”

We hear similar comments from philosophers. Not unlike many of the scenes in the movie *Fame*, Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenized Jew, complains in his writings that, “fame and honor are a most precarious possession, tossed about on the reckless tempers and flighty words of careless men.”

Honor continues to be of ultimate importance well after the disciples discussion of greatness today. In the letter to the Romans, for example, Paul tells church members that they must, “outdo one another in showing honor,” just as the cast in *Fame* continually tries to do with each other throughout the movie.

Perhaps Jesus is rightfully upset in today’s Gospel about the pettiness of the argument going on among the disciples as they attempt to sort out who is greater than the other. But I do not believe, as some have suggested, that Jesus did not want the

disciples, or us, to strive for greatness. I think it is bizarre to suggest that Jesus, for example, would castigate a student in the New York School for Performing Arts for utilizing every ounce of ability God gave them to be the best artist possible. What Jesus attacks today is not the disciples striving for greatness, but rather their definition of what it means to be great.

That definition began for them with the honor code. Greatness is first achieved, the culture taught, through association. If you hang around with great people, you too will attain some measure of greatness. This is why Jews and Romans both segregated undesirables, because the theory was that these people would infect everyone and take their honor and potential for greatness away. But from the outset of his ministry, Jesus attacks this understanding of greatness. That is why he continually hangs around with the dishonorable people in that society. He wants to prove to the disciples and to us that cootie dust will not attach to you if you embrace the other.

Today, Jesus takes this message one step further. Not only can you not “catch” dishonor from someone, but in reality the exact opposite is actually the case. If we really want to attain any level of greatness, Jesus tells us that we must begin by hanging around those the rest of the world considers dishonorable.

When we understand just how pervasive this honor/shame structure was in that society, it is easy to see why people were so upset with Jesus for hanging around tax collectors, shepherds, and women. But there was another group in that society that was even lower in the pecking order than these groups.

I so much would like to tell you this morning that Jesus ushers a little child into

the midst of the disciples to remind them and us of the central place children should have in our lives and particularly in our worship habits. I have heard sermons on this Gospel suggesting that the message we should retrieve from it today is that we should not get upset when a kid yells out during the Eucharistic Prayer. That would, of course, play right into our theology here at St. David's. But I believe that would be proof-texting, because unfortunately, I don't think that is what Jesus had in mind at all when he chose a child to make today's point.

We cannot make this leap in our culture because children had a much different position in antiquity. They were, in fact, the least important member of society. Slaves actually had more rights than children. Of course their parents loved them, but children had no honor at all and could reach no level of greatness. Part of the reason for that was a practical one. After all, infant mortality rates reached 30% and more than half of children did not survive to the age of 16. When a famine came, children were the last to be fed. Even by the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas tells us that in case of a fire, a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, then his wife, and last of all, the child. Children always came last on the honor roll on any list in the first century. They had nothing and they could acquire nothing. In the wisdom books of Proverbs and Sirach, fathers are actually told to physically punish their children because they are considered evil.

The reason that Jesus chooses a child today to make his point about greatness, is because children were the ultimate image of powerlessness. He is defining greatness in a way no one had ever heard imagined before. Here is the disciples

answer to who among them is the greatest. It is this little illiterate, uneducated, unemployed scavenger who had no rights to anything.

By asking the disciples to welcome the very image of dishonor, the one in the society who could never return any favor on any level, Jesus is offering a completely new worldview. Where the Roman culture surrounding them, as well as their own Jewish wisdom tradition, taught that what made you great were the people you associated with, Jesus tells them the opposite. Jesus suggests, once again, that the very foundation of the society, the core value of honor, is misplaced.

It is this understanding of greatness that will shorten Jesus's life considerably. By suggesting to us that greatness is all about being last and serving others, he shakes the foundations of the honor code and how society was stratified. He knows exactly what is going to happen to him as a result, and he tells the disciples this quite plainly as today's Gospel opens.

But it seems to me that what Jesus is telling us in all this is what the kids are singing about in the movie *Fame*. Yes, life is short, but we have an opportunity to do something about it. If we strive for greatness, as Jesus understands greatness, we need not worry about the length of our physical life. We need not worry because by being great as Jesus taught us, we can live forever.

This then, is our calling. We are the few who are asked to stand up for the stupid and crazy, to protect the most vulnerable members of society, to break down the social systems that create injustice, to offer an alternative wisdom to a world where image is everything. We must embrace the person everyone else has rejected. We

must start seeing the invisible people of the world, the invisible creatures of this world. If we are to be followers of Jesus, we must throw status out the window. We must be willing to stop looking for ways to self validate and instead search for ways to be a servant to all. We must accept that the theology of Jesus is always from the bottom up, that if we are to be great in the kingdom of God, we need to finish last.

Let each of us then, embrace Jesus's view of greatness and then work just as hard as the kids in *Fame* to achieve that greatness. As Barbara Brown Taylor has said, let us all understand that it is what we do when we think no one is looking, with someone who does not count, that ushers all of us into the presence of God.

Beloved, we too can live forever, and this is how we do it. In the words of the prayer we say here together each Maundy Thursday, let us go forth, creating a world where the nobodies will be somebodies and the somebodies will be nobodies. Amen.