

CRIBB<S>NOTE – September 20, 2009

Have you ever felt great? Have you felt like you could take on the world? There is the scene from the movie, Titanic, when Leonardo DiCaprio's character, Jack Dawson, climbs a high pole onboard the doomed ship and screams at the top of his lungs, "I'm king of the world." It's a captivating moment in the film as it expresses a sense of high adventure and conquest. Dawson feels the happiness of winning the heart and love of a beautiful woman. He felt great.

Former world heavy weight boxing champion Muhammad Ali dubbed himself, "The Greatest," as he fought his way to the top of the boxing world. He announced publicly, "I am the greatest." Although he was referring to his incredible feats in the ring knocking out one opponent after the other during the prime of his career, many of his critics began to see him as more than an athlete with Olympic-class skills. He became the most recognized person in the world because of his humanitarian contributions. Few people have been so bold as to put such a moniker on themselves like Ali.

There is the temptation to believe our success is attributed to a special ability we have that cannot be duplicated by others. We might feel we are special; great. Individually, we may mask such feelings about ourselves, but as a nation we proclaim our sense of superiority loudly and frequently. In fact, as school children we participate in a daily ritual of reinforcing the idea that 'America is the greatest country in the world'. If someone were to challenge that idea, it would be paramount to treason; an act of ingratitude or worse.

Having a sense of greatness is valued and encouraged, but it also carries a depth of responsibility that is not easily attained. To be great means more than a pronouncement. It requires acting in a manner that is consistent with the highest ideals and morals. It includes a standard of living that is above the norm. It sets aside expedience and avoids traps that lure selfishness.

That is the point Jesus made to his disciples who were arguing among themselves about which of them was the greatest. From the outside, it appeared at least three of them had earned the title. After all, Peter, James and John had been to the mountaintop. They had witnessed the blinding light radiating from Jesus' face as the Voice spoke through the clouds and told them to listen to God's "beloved Son." They had healed the sick and walked with Jesus. Surely, there was greatness in them.

When Jesus heard them making claims about their feats, he pulled them aside and caused them to ponder deeply the true meaning of greatness. To be great means to be humble. It is putting yourself last after all others have been served. It means you are left behind as others go ahead of you. Jesus turns the tables upside down with his teachings and definition. Perhaps his disciples had other ideas. They may have thought being great allowed them to sit in the best seats and receive honors from the public. They did not think being great meant becoming a servant. They thought it would put them first and up front ahead of everybody else.

Whether it is a person or a country, to be great means you must have compassion and care for the welfare of the poor, the least and the most vulnerable. It means acting in a way that the greatest good is achieved. It means humbling ourselves with the knowledge that God's love is given freely to everybody. As the motto of Rotary International reminds us, greatness is measured when we put "service above self."