

Saints are not born, they are made and some of them were made of pretty rough materials. In a book called “***Saints Behaving Badly***” we hear of the scandalous, spicy, and even sleazy detours that some people took on the road to sainthood.

I would like to tell you about one of these eventual saints. The man's name was Hippolytus and he lived in Rome at the beginning of the third century. Hippolytus was a brilliant man, but he suffered from a defect common to intellectuals. He was proud to the point of arrogance and he resented anyone having authority over him - especially those he considered his intellectual inferiors. And as far as Hippolytus was concerned, his intellectual inferiors included just about everyone in Rome, whether they were Christian or pagan. He particularly resented Pope Zephyrinus. In his writings he harshly attacked the pope calling him "an uninformed, illiterate and shamefully corrupt man." But the man he really hates is the pope's advisor, Callixtus, who he calls "a man cunning in wickedness". Callixtus was a former slave, who by his virtue and hard work, rose to prominence in the Church. Hippolytus, of course, felt he should be the top advisor to the pope, not some freed slave.

Things came to a head when Zephyrinus died in 217 A.D. Hippolytus considered himself the only logical candidate for pope, but you can probably guess who was elected instead of him. That's right: Callixtus, the former slave. That was too much for Hippolytus. He encouraged his followers to proclaim him pope – or as history calls him, an anti-pope. Five years later a violent mob murdered Pope Callixtus. Even that did not soften the heart of Hippolytus. He continued as continued to divide the church as antipope for another thirteen years. Finally, the Roman Emperor got tired of the arguing and sentenced both Hippolytus and the true pope - named Pontian- to hard labor in the mines of Sardinia.

In that terrible place Hippolytus finally repented of his schism and asked to be reconciled with the Church. Together he and Pontian both died of the inhuman conditions in the mines.

St. Hippolytus, a man whose crippling ambition separated him from the Church, in the end drank the cup of martyrdom. His life mirrors today's Gospel. Like the brothers James and John, Hippolytus wanted the first rank in the Church. In the early church three apostles - Peter, James and John - are especially close to Jesus. They were handpicked to be with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration and in the garden of Gethsemane. In these turning points of his life, Jesus sees clearly that his commitment to do his Father's will would entail suffering and death. But Peter, James and John do not see how the failure of suffering and death could have anything to do with God's plan. In today's gospel James and John are more concerned with the success of having highest positions of honor and power in the kingdom.

This seemed like the time to make their move. Shortly before, Jesus had called Peter a Satan because Peter had argued with him when he began to talk about the suffering and death he would soon undergo. Now seemed the right time to make the big three into the dynamic duo and leave Peter behind. They were so mistaken about what the future held for them. What Jesus offered instead of rank and fame was the cup of suffering. We don't know how they reacted. They didn't leave but they probably weren't all that eager to accept this new challenge, at least not right away. When it came to the passion they vanished just like the rest of the apostles.

It took a long time for Hippolytus to accept that cup of suffering and let go of all his own plans, ambitions and accomplishments. Even then it practically had to be forced on him. But he did drink it - and it cured him. He sought unity instead of division.

You and I might not be gripped by quite the same level of ambition as James and John - or St. Hippolytus. Maybe we are more like the other ten apostles. When they heard about the brothers' bid for power, they reacted indignantly. "Indignant" – that's not a common word these days but it is a common emotion. It means angry, outraged, annoyed – and you can probably think of other less socially acceptable synonyms. So on one level you can understand their reaction to this power play, but you also have to wonder if they didn't harbor similar ambitions. Aren't they mostly upset because someone beat them to it?

Jesus warns the whole bunch about the dangers of ambition. He tells them they must rather aspire to the role of servants. Even though we talk about elected officials being "public servants," we really don't have much notion of what the word means. In Jesus' day the word servant was someone on duty twenty-four hours a day and who did whatever the boss told him. It's not exactly a promising career.

To be a servant in the way that Jesus was servant means to live in complete trust that God loves us in the way that God loved Jesus during his earthly life. Jesus was not servant because he feared a tyrant God, but as beloved Son, he in turn loved as he was loved. It is a free service of love, not a forced slavery. Jesus in effect redefines greatness. A man does not become great by making a million dollars. He does it by spending time with those the world considers insignificant, by being willing to reach out those who can't repay you and by demonstrating the love that God has for each and every one of us.

The famous Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, said, "When ambition ends, happiness begins." Hippolytus was miserable most of his life; James and John probably not so happy at the end of today's gospel.

There is a noble ambition that works to achieve some great purpose. And there is the ambition which eats at a person's heart - they want prestige, they want to be the center of the world and they never will be.

Jesus shows us the way out of that terrible trap: *"Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first must be the slave of all."* All those saints behaving badly with the "colorful" escapades – they searched in all the wrong places because they were so miserable. They searched in vain for something would make them feel good about themselves and they were still miserable. They only found happiness when they started searching for ways to help others recognize the good that could be theirs. That is what a servant does.