

A scandalous life

By [Paul J. Wadell](#)

October 12, 2009

Americans love a good scandal. We're mesmerized by the salacious details of celebrities' lives, by politicians trapped in webs of greed and infidelity and by clergy gone astray. Maybe we're drawn to the titillating lapses and scurrilous misdeeds of the powerful because we delight in seeing the mighty fall or the hypocrisies of the arrogant exposed. Or perhaps we enjoy the consolation that comes from comparing our own messed-up lives to theirs: at least we're not *that* bad!

But this week's Gospel passage draws our attention to what it might mean to live a truly scandalous life. We traditionally associate scandal with evil: a scandalous act leads the impressionable astray, and a scandalous person has a corrupting influence on others. Some of us can remember being warned about causing scandal, about saying or doing something that could be an occasion of ruin for another.

Today this understanding of scandal seems almost quaint, because we have grown so comfortable with what once was considered horrible and intolerable. We may be fascinated by the foibles of the rich and famous, but we are hardly scandalized by them because their behavior no longer seems so egregious. In many respects their misdeeds are merely dramatic exaggerations of our own.

In this respect, we may be more truly scandalized by good than we are by evil, more shocked by virtue than by vice. Scandal is derived from a Greek word meaning "stumbling block" or obstacle. The Jesus we meet in the Gospels is probably more of a stumbling block for us than are the politicians and celebrities whose failings are regularly paraded before us. The reason is that Jesus radically challenges our deepest convictions and ambitions.

Something like this occurs when James and John ask Jesus to seat them on his right and left when he enters into glory. Like the disciples, we associate greatness and glory with power and privilege, with ruling over others rather than being ruled by them. But Jesus scandalizes us by proposing a most distasteful account of what

constitutes true greatness. If we want to be first we “must be slave of all,” and the path to greatness is found not in having all our whims and desires met by others but in service, sacrifice and relentlessly generous love.

Even more disheartening, Jesus insists that we become great only by “drinking the cup” of suffering and affliction and by being baptized with him into his passion and death. The same message is woven through this Sunday’s reading from the letter to the Hebrews. Jesus was exalted as high priest and “became the source of eternal salvation” not on account of his miracles or his many wondrous deeds, but because of his passion and death.

These readings reminded me that Princess Diana and Mother Teresa died within a few days of each other. Which of them had a truly scandalous life? We don’t associate Mother Teresa with scandal, but perhaps her life of heroic compassion and tireless love is more of a stumbling block for us than whatever misdeeds might taint our memory of the princess of Wales. We keep our distance from Jesus, and from his most faithful imitators, because their unusual ways of being challenge us to seriously rethink our lives.

A scandalous life can lead us astray. But isn’t the Christian life a matter of being continually led astray by Jesus, of being pulled out of our ordinary ways of thinking and perceiving and evaluating, so that we can discover where real life and real glory can truly be found?

Additional lectionary columns by Wadell appear in the October 6 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.