

## Sermon for March 26, 2017 – Lent 4

**Matthew 20:17-28** (Evangelical Heritage Version)

### Theme: A Lesson on Greatness

- 1) *What it is to the World.*
- 2) *What it is to God.*

<sup>17</sup>As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside; and on the way he said to them, <sup>18</sup>“Look, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and experts in the law, and they will condemn him to death. <sup>19</sup>They will hand him over to the Gentiles to mock, flog, and crucify him. On the third day he will be raised.”<sup>20</sup>Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to him with her sons, kneeling and asking something of him. <sup>21</sup>He said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Promise that in your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand and one on your left hand.”<sup>22</sup>But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are.”<sup>23</sup>He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not for me to give; rather these places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”<sup>24</sup>When the ten heard this, they were angry with the two brothers.<sup>25</sup>But Jesus summoned them and said, “You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup>It will not be that way among you. Instead whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, <sup>27</sup>and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave—<sup>28</sup>just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

What is your definition of greatness? The world generally equates it with wealth, prestige and influence. And is it any different with us? What little girl hasn’t dreamt about being a princess; or little boy about being a famous athlete?

In our sermon text for this morning, we find Jesus’ disciples holding on to this worldly notion of greatness. Jesus promised they would one day share in his glory. Sadly the disciples misunderstood wherein Jesus’ glory actually lay. And don’t we sometimes do the same? Let us, therefore, listen to the lesson Jesus gave his disciples on the way to Jerusalem, under the theme: **A lesson on greatness: 1) *What it is to the world and 2) what it is to God.***

### Part One: What it is to the world.

Our text finds Jesus on his final journey to Jerusalem. He tried to prepare his disciples for what lay ahead, so that they wouldn’t be overwhelmed with grief when all the horror of what he was about to suffer came to pass.

We read: <sup>17</sup>As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside; and on the way he said to them, <sup>18</sup>“Look, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to

*the chief priests and experts in the law, and they will condemn him to death. <sup>19</sup>They will hand him over to the Gentiles to mock, flog, and crucify him. On the third day he will be raised.”*

Jesus could not have been more clear and concise in telling his disciples exactly what would happen to him. Sadly, whenever Jesus tried to prepare them for these things, the disciples seem to always miss the part where he promised his resurrection.<sup>1</sup> Why? Because the idea of Jesus' suffering and death seemed so contradictory to the greatness and glory they imagined for him, that they couldn't get past it. In other words: their own ideas of greatness and glory prevented them from understanding wherein it is truly found.

*<sup>20</sup>Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to him with her sons, kneeling and asking something of him. <sup>21</sup>He said to her, "What do you want?" "She said to him, "Promise that in your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand and one on your left hand." Wow, isn't this striking: Jesus just finished speaking of his suffering, death and resurrection - the great price he would pay to establish his kingdom – when, shortly after this, Salome (the mother of James and John) comes with the selfish request that her sons may hold the highest and greatest places in his kingdom. Now, in Salome's defense, she probably didn't hear what Jesus had said on this occasion about his coming suffering, death and resurrection; but James and John, who made this request with her, did hear it!*

And what moved them to make their selfish request? Their misunderstanding of what Jesus' Kingdom consisted in and wherein true greatness actually lay. Throughout Jesus ministry - all the way up to his ascension in to heaven – the disciples imagined that Jesus was going to establish a glorious political kingdom, that would span the globe. They imagined Jesus' greatness and glory would be like that of an earthly emperor. Salome wanted her sons to be the chief men in Jesus' kingdom - the most important men. This is greatness to the world.

How often aren't we like Salome and the rest of the disciples – imagining that Christ came to establish some sort of earthly kingdom, in which his followers will live lives of comfort and glory? And doesn't that stand to reason? "If the almighty King over all loves me, why wouldn't he provide me with all the money, food and health I desire? Why shouldn't I expect my earthly life to be easy and blessed if I follow him?"

Like the disciples, we don't always carefully listen to everything Jesus tells us. We let our preconceived notions of how we want things to be prevent us from understanding him correctly. For example, when Jesus speaks of the blessings believers receive through their relationship with him, more often than not, he is referring to the spiritual blessings of forgiveness, life and salvation. We often turn a deaf ear to what he says about having trouble in the world, all men hating us and the evil we will face because of our relationship with him. Yes, like the disciples, we easily fall into the mindset that the kingdom of God is some sort of earthly kingdom, which will result in our earthly wealth, influence and prestige. But this is not true. Christ's kingdom is his spiritual rule in the hearts of believers through the Gospel. It is a rule that will move us to love and serve each other as Christ loved and served us; for this is wherein true greatness lies.

Part Two: What it is to God.

Notice how lovingly and gently Jesus answers his disciples and their mother. He knows that their request was a result of a misguided faith (as foolish prayers often are).

<sup>22</sup>*But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink? The brothers didn’t fully understand the suffering and self-sacrificing service Jesus was about to render in order for his kingdom to come. They didn’t understand that following Jesus means being treated like him, who was about to suffer and die at the hands of his enemies. Followers of Jesus can always expect such treatment from the world, as he would later tell his disciples: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”<sup>ii</sup>*

This is why Jesus, thinking about his impending suffering, asks James and John if they were able to drink from the same cup he would drink from.

*“They said to him, “We are.” The disciples’ quick response shows that they didn’t quite understand what Jesus was talking about. But Jesus accepts their response anyway. <sup>23</sup>He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup.” Yes, the disciples most certainly would suffer all sorts of persecutions and evils, as they spread the good news of Christ’s forgiveness into the world. All but one would die a violent death. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Jesus could exalt them into the positions of honor and greatness that they desired: “to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not for me to give; rather these places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.*

What does Jesus mean when he says that those places have been prepared by His Father? It means that, before the creation of the world, God the Father had already graciously planned out all things regarding Christ’s kingdom – including whom he would glorify. Being in full agreement with his Father, Jesus neither could, nor would, go against his Father’s gracious will regarding who would be thus honored in heaven.

<sup>24</sup>*When the ten heard this, they were angry with the two brothers – not because they were appalled that James and John would ask such a thing, knowing all that Jesus was about to suffer. No, the disciples were mad because they didn’t think about asking Jesus for these positions first. The other 10 felt they were more worthy of such an honor than James and John. They wanted this greatness for themselves.*

And how often don’t we do the same? How often doesn’t our sinful human nature rear its ugly head, when another brother or sister succeeds. “Why did he get the promotion?” we secretly wonder. “I’m just as good as him. I could even do a better job.” As our text points out, even church workers are not immune to such selfish pride. “Why does Pastor so and so over there get to be on TV? Why do all the people praise him instead of me? I’m just as good a preacher.” Yes, even pastors can easily become sinfully angry at another brother’s success. And if this is true regarding Jesus’ very own disciples, how can it not be true of all of us! “Lord, have mercy on us for such selfish, evil thinking!”

*Jesus summoned them and said, “You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup>It will not be that way among you. Instead whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, <sup>27</sup>and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave— <sup>28</sup>just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

Jesus shows wherein true greatness lies: it is not in being served or having things done according to our wishes. It is not ruling over people - barking orders at them to do what you want them to do. True greatness is found in serving - giving up your comforts for the benefit of someone else. Yes, serving - not to get something in return, but out of genuine love for the person we serve - this is what God counts as great in his eyes. Why? Because it reflects his greatest glory: the loving service he rendered us in Christ.

Consider what Jesus, the one true King of the Universe, did for us: he gave up his heavenly comfort and took on human flesh and blood. He suffered at the hands of those who should be suffering at his hands because of their sin. Why did he do it? In order to pay for their sins in full that God might declare them forgiven. Yes, Jesus who is *in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!<sup>iii</sup>* This is what God the Father considers true greatness. *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.<sup>iv</sup>*

Do you desire greatness in God’s kingdom? Then follow Christ’s lead and serve others as he himself served us!

But serving someone in the manner Christ served us is a hard thing to do. So often our generosity is taken advantage of and abused. How can we go on serving when this happens? By remembering Christ’s service towards us. How often haven’t we sinfully taken advantage of his love, and yet he continues to express it to us day after day? Why does he do? For his mercy’s sake.

Let us learn from this and, in the peace of forgiveness show true greatness by serving others as the LORD has served us. God is glorified when we do this, and he promises to graciously reward such service – all because of Christ’s great service for us. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. also Matthew 16:21f. and 17:22f.

<sup>ii</sup> John 15:20 (NIV84)

<sup>iii</sup> Philippians 2:6-8 (NIV84)

<sup>iv</sup> Philippians 2:9-11 (NIV84)