

Sermon for October 28, 2012 – 22nd Sunday in Pentecost

Mark 10:35-45

Theme: Godly Greatness . . .

- 1) *Is not found in selfish ambition,*
- 2) *But in serving others as Jesus served us.*

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." ³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. ³⁷ They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." ³⁸ "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" ³⁹ "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." ⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴² Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Do you know what "selective hearing" is? It's paying attention only to the things you want to pay attention to and ignoring the rest. For example a mother might say to a child: "You can watch TV after you do your homework." Later, when the mother confronts her child why he is watching TV with unfinished homework, the child might say: "But you said I could watch TV."

All people have a problem with selective hearing - and this is probably nowhere more clearly seen than in theology. People hear what they want to hear from God's word and ignore the rest.

The disciples also had this problem. They rightly believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They rightly looked forward to the coming kingdom of glory. But they failed to listen to Jesus' instruction about how his kingdom comes: through his suffering and death on the cross.

One of the starkest examples of their selective hearing is seen in our sermon text for today. Right before our text, Jesus told his disciples about his coming suffering, death and resurrection. This was somber news, but what do James and John do? Together, with their mother, they ask for positions of greatness and honor. Jesus uses the occasion to teach his disciples where true glory and greatness are to be found: not in selfish ambition, but serving others as the Lord himself served us.

Part One: Godly greatness is not found in selfish ambition

Our text begins: *James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to [Jesus]. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."*

I don't know about you, but the disciples' question reminds me of how a child might ask his parent for something the child knows the parent is not going to agree too: "Mommy and Daddy, I want you to say yes, promise me you will say yes - before I even ask my question." Only a fool would do that.

But the disciples' question is not only childish, it is also childlike in a good way. Jesus tells us that we can boldly ask him for anything. And James and John hold Jesus to this promise - they come before him ready to ask, trusting that he will listen. This kind of trust is certainly commendable - if it weren't for the fact that it stems from a somewhat selfish motive.

And yet how often aren't we like the disciples? When it comes to something we want, we too approach God's throne boldly in prayer. This is not necessarily wrong. What is sad is that it usually stems from selfish motives. What is more sad is that we don't boldly ask for the things that God clearly wants to give us - like greater understanding of his Word, an increase of faith and a greater measure of His Spirit.

³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. ³⁷ They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

Ah, yes - the selective hearing of the disciples rears its head again! They remember Jesus telling them: "when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Matthew 19:28) But they failed to remember what Jesus said about the price he would have to pay to win that glory for them. Instead, they were wondering what position they would have in heaven. They wanted positions of glory and honor. And, since they were part of Jesus inner circle, why not ask for them?

Jesus deals with their request kindly. He doesn't berate or rebuke them harshly. Why not? Because Jesus is happy that they believe his words enough to come to him with their request – even if it is a little foolish. But he also doesn't leave them in their simple mindedness. He gently guides them to think properly.

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

The disciples really didn't know what they were asking. To be with Jesus means to follow him. He just finished saying that he would suffer ridicule, beatings and death. Suffering was the cup Jesus would have to drink, death the baptism Jesus would have to undergo for our salvation. This was His road to glory, and those who wished to share this glory with him would have to follow their Savior down this road. Jesus himself said: *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*" (Mark 8:34)

Jesus talked about his cup of suffering and baptism of death to get his disciples to think. All that Jesus did was for them. His glory was all about service. Did the disciples understand this? Their question didn't seem to indicate so.

And so, without much thought, James and John respond: "We can," ... Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with..."

Yes, the disciples would have to suffer for Jesus' sake. James became the first of the apostles to suffer a martyr's death when he was beheaded by Herod. Even though John lived a long life and probably died a natural death, he - nevertheless - had to suffer. He saw his beloved Church undergo persecution. He himself was exiled to the Island of Patmos. "But," Jesus says, "to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

A person cannot "earn" positions of honor or greatness in God's kingdom. These positions are given merely by the grace of God to those whom he - out of undeserved love - has chosen to give them too. It is not right for us to covet them. Why not? Because the kingdom of Christ is not about us and the glory we can get. It is all about Christ and his glory of saving us.

Let us take a step back from our sermon text for a moment. It is easy for us to look at this account and be disgusted with James and John. How could they ask what they did? And yet, don't we also share their childish desire for glory and greatness? We love to be recognized and praised. And if we don't get it, what's the point in serving? Jesus tells us: the point of serving Jesus is greatness and glory - not the kind the James and John desired, but rather the greatness and glory of Christ - that his name might be exalted on this earth that many more people might believe in him and be saved.

Part Two: Godly greatness is . . . serving others as Jesus served us.

"When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John." Not because they thought this desire for greatness was wrong, but because John and James had asked for it. They wanted those positions!

This is why Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you." The leaders of this world make decisions that benefit themselves. They expect to be served. You never see a king die for his soldiers, rather you see soldiers die for their king. But this is not what the Kingdom of Christ - the Church - is like. Such ideas of glory and greatness have no place in the Church - especially among its leaders.

"Instead," Jesus said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all." Greatness in God's eyes is all about showing love and serving. And the greatest person in the kingdom of God is not the person being served, but the one serving - the one who gives up his rights to everything in order that others might be happy and get ahead. This is what God considers glory - and this glory is the exact opposite of the world's idea of glory.

Do you want to see the primary example of what Christ means? Than look no farther than Christ Jesus himself: *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

There is no better commentary on this verse than what the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Philippians: *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!"* (Philippians 2:5-8)

Jesus is definitely first in the Kingdom of God, but he willingly humbled himself to a low position – becoming a slave to God's law and suffering for the sins of all people. And why did he do this? Not in order to gain glory and greatness for himself. No, he did this out of sheer love for us, to lift us up, to give us a gift that we couldn't even begin earning. This is what God considers greatness, and this greatness was rewarded by God the Father - who *"exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* (Philippians 2:9-11)

Brothers and sisters in Christ: do you want to be great in the Kingdom of God? Than serve each other in love just as the LORD himself served and ransomed us from our sins. Since we are children of God, whose sins have been fully paid for through the work of Christ, let us serve one another in love - all to the glory of him of who saved us. For such loving service is great and glorious in the eyes of God. Amen.