

Greatness in the Kingdom

Proper 24, Year B – Mark 10:35-45

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, October 18, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I know that I committed to preaching on the Epistle reading for the year. And I know that there are a few more weeks left on the Liturgical Calendar. But we just did the whole, “Priest according to the order of Melchizedek” back in Lent, the same *reading*, and I said *then* pretty much everything I had to say about our buddy Melchy. And then there’s the Gospel reading. Maybe like me, when you heard this morning’s Gospel, you were saying, “Hey, didn’t we just hear this one?” The last few weeks have gone by in such a rush, that I had to actually look it up to be sure, but it was just four weeks ago that an earlier portion of Mark’s Gospel told the story of the disciples chattering away behind Jesus’ back about who would be greatest in the Kingdom of God. A different *reading* at least, a different story, a little further down the road, but here they are, at it again.

So I got to wondering, what *is* greatness? I looked up “great” in Webster’s and found that it means: 1 : notably large in size : huge : of a kind characterized by relative largeness : elaborate, ample 2 : remarkable in magnitude, degree, or effectiveness 3 : eminent, distinguished : chief or preeminent over others : aristocratic, grand 4 : principal, main 5 : markedly superior in character or quality; especially : noble : used as a generalized term of approval : an outstandingly superior or skillful person. With the possible exception of that “notably large in size” part, these are all qualities which we as humans seek to have applied to ourselves. We *all* want to be great, top of the heap, king of the hill. It is the American way. Oh, who am I kidding? As a one-time student of psychology, as a some-time student of history, as a *full-time* student of *theology*, I know that it’s not so much the American way, it’s the *human* way. Something in us, some part of who we *are*, just naturally wants to be better and bigger and stronger and faster. What it boils down to is that little human quality that Scripture calls the root of all sin – pride.

Now don’t get me wrong, striving for self-improvement – looking around, and especially looking *inside*, and saying, “I could do better than I’m doing right now, I could *be* better than I am right now,” there’s nothing bad about *that* in and of itself. But so often, our longing to be better, our striving for greatness, is driven by good old-fashioned, sinful *pride*. Instead of measuring up to see if we have improved, instead of asking if we have *grown*, instead of looking to see whether we are truly developing any quality worthy of real *greatness*, we only want to know if we are better and bigger and stronger and faster, than the *other* guy.

And, surprise, surprise, Jesus’ disciples have the same condition. Jesus *tried* to set them straight a chapter before. He *tried* to explain his ministry and his mission four weeks ago. He *tried* to tell them that the first would be last, that the last would be first, and that the one who would be greatest must be servant of all. Jesus *tried* to tell them, but here they are, at it again. The disciples have that same condition we all have, and what Jesus was trying to tell them just doesn’t fit with their vision of how things should turn out. It doesn’t fit their plans for greatness, for being top of the heap, king of the hill, winner first time, *every* time.

As they walked along, helping Jesus heal the sick and raise the oppressed and give hope to the poor, they let their minds wander to “bigger” and “better” things. They day-dreamed of the day when the Messiah would overcome the Romans, a day when Caesar, and Pilate, and Herod would be out of the way, a day when Jesus was crowned as the King of Israel. And because they knew Jesus in the tough times when he was spending his time with the poor and the oppressed, with lepers and sinners, *they* would be given special places in the new Kingdom, they would *be* special, *they* would be great. As they walked along, they discussed whether Peter or Matthew

would be the Chief of Staff in this Kingdom of God that Jesus said was coming. Of course, Judas would be Secretary of the Treasury. James would handle the Department of the Interior. John would make a good Secretary of State, he's so good with people and all...

Of course, in *this* week's episode, James and John have it all figured out. "We've been thinking about our conversation the other day," they tell their master, "and we've come up with the perfect solution to this leadership issue." It all sounds perfectly logical really, one on one side of the throne, the other on the other. But of course, what they were *really* trying to do was to take some short-cut to being better and bigger and stronger and faster than the next guy. They were trying to claim for themselves the greatness that their master kept saying, and kept saying, and kept saying belonged not to the best or the biggest or the strongest or the fastest, but to those that were willing to be the *servant* to all.

Later on and further down the road, Jesus taught them again what it means to be great in the Kingdom of God, by setting aside his robes of honor and kneeling on the floor to wash their feet. That same night, he taught them *again* about greatness in the Kingdom of God, as in borrowed purple, with stripes across his back and a crown of *thorns*, he stood silently in the courts of rulers and governors and kings. The next morning he taught them *again* about greatness in the Kingdom of God, by carrying a cross through withering heat and choking dust and taunting jeers to the place of execution. And there, to serve *all* the weak and the lost, to embrace not just his friends, but the whole world, to teach about the greatness of being bound in service to one another, to teach about the greatness of being a slave to love for those that simply don't deserve it, God from God, Light from light, true God from true God, spread his arms wide, and was nailed to the cross.

And when it was over, where were those who wanted so badly to drink the cup of greatness? Where were *any* of those who wanted so badly to bask in the glory of the Kingdom of God? A thief who *repented* was there. The ones who walked *behind* the master and the twelve making sure that they had what they needed, they were there. Perhaps the one that had washed Jesus' feet with her own tears was there. Those that waited for his beaten, broken body to be lowered to their mournful grasp were there. It wasn't the ones who were jockeying for position and power and prestige and privilege who were blessed to behold the holy Lamb of God at the moment of his true greatness. It was the ones who sought to receive. It was the ones who sought to embrace. It was the ones who sought to serve.

If we want to receive the Kingdom of God, we must receive the *King*, with our arms wide open and our hands at work. If we want to one day hear the words, "Well done, my good and faithful servant," we must practice serving the ones we can reach *right now*. If we want to embrace the Christ, the blessed Lamb of God, we must practice embracing those he called "the least of these." Greatness in God's kingdom is not about conquering or overcoming. It's about the absolute, *unfathomable* love of the Almighty God of all creation, the one who stooped to a broken world to save even such a pathetic, worthless loser, such a prideful, sinful wretch... as me.

Thanks be to God.