

Pastor T.C. Arnold
4th Sunday after Trinity
Genesis 50:15-21
July 1st, 2012

How is greatness measured? Some may say go down to Ward Parkway and gander at the impressive homes. Those inside have made a name for themselves. They have greatness. The mortgage company might measure greatness by credit rating. Others might measure greatness by a high office one might hold in a large downtown business or even a high political office. How about a teen-ager's popularity or good grades, academic degrees or an impressive sounding title?

Oh, there are all sorts of ways to measure greatness. Not one of the aforementioned standards are really all that important in the grand scheme of things. You see, there are many twisted standards by which people measure greatness. God's people are engaged in these pursuits all the time. And if we believe these are the measure of true greatness, then we have a lot to learn.

"When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?'" Behind this troubled and anxious statement of Joseph's brothers stands the history which sets the stage for the measurement of Joseph's greatness.

You see it all came rushing and tumbling back so harshly now as they stood together after the burial of their father Jacob. The brother's day has come. They remembered all too well their plotting to get rid of Joseph some years ago. They were so jealous of his favor with their father Jacob, and that coat of many colors that had been fashioned for Joseph was a source of irritation every time they saw it. It was impossible to tolerate this seeming favoritism any longer, Joseph had to go! And now, it was all coming back to bite them in the backside.

Many years before this moment in our text the brothers of Joseph, the sons of Jacob, spun plans of throwing Joseph in a deep hole and somehow get rid of him. Reuben, the oldest, talked his brothers out of murder. Instead, they sold him to merchant-travelers. The many years it had been since that incident had not dimmed their memories. They figured it wouldn't have dimmed Joseph's either. That is why they told this lie. There is no greatness measured by this moment for the brothers of Joseph. They did all they could – even lied – to show how they would submit to the greatness of Joseph instead.

What is very interesting for the sake of this situation in the early history of the people of Israel is that there were words repeated by Joseph to his brothers that their father had spoken years before. In all their fears of what their brother would do to them, Joseph put their fears to bed by demonstrating where true greatness resides. He said to his brothers, *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?"* A statement like that shows greatness. A statement like that puts the one who is in charge – in charge.

Remember, I said the father of Joseph, Jacob, spoke these words many years before Joseph used them in the text. Well, seeing what Jacob did might show us how great Joseph was to use these words. The reason I said this is because it is important for us to understand what Jacob did before saying these words in Genesis chapter thirty. Allow me to explain.

Jacob loved Rachel, his wife, but Rachel was unable to have children. Rachel got angry because of this (and because her sister, Leah, was able to give him children) and told Jacob, *"Give me children, or I'll die."* Jacob responded, *"Am I in the place of God."* Only the greatness of God can do such things. Acknowledging this fact shows the greatness of the one who said it. It shows that God is above all things... that God is in charge... that they must submit to the will of God. The funny thing is, Jacob didn't always do that.

You see, Jacob was forever trying to secure a blessing by his own efforts. You remember how Jacob deceived his brother Esau and his father Isaac into receiving the family blessing. He lied to his brother and to his father, even going as far as putting on Esau's clothes and putting goatskin on his arms (Esau was hairy and Jacob had smooth skin) to fool Isaac who all but blind during his last days of life on earth. Jacob was "playing God" and attempting to deceive and receive that measure of greatness through a special blessing.

Have you fallen into the trap of playing God? How quickly we claim the right to play God. How hastily we rush to make judgments. How easily we stumble into the trap of repaying evil for evil, one cruel word deserves another we say. How readily and with what arrogance we stand in the place of God lashing out with our own punishments because of the misdeeds of others. How long we hold our grudges, and how foolishly we coddle and nurse our hurts. How great is our need for the real measure of greatness that is demonstrated by a willingness to acknowledge that it is the Lord alone who searches the depths of the heart. The Lord is big enough and wise enough to make right judgments, He has no need for our advice nor must He wait with bated breath for our counsel. St. Paul says to the Romans, "*Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge... It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord.*" To us our Jesus says, "*Love your enemies,*" He said, "*Do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that spitefully use you.*" A tall order to fill and not easy either. But that is what God expects from His children... that God will be God... and the measure of Greatness belongs to Him.

You see, the measure of a man's greatness is seen in his readiness to forgive. What a tender scene this text holds before us. There was good news for those fearful brothers. Joseph opens the door to a warm, new relationship created by a genuine word of forgiveness that he speaks, "*Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So don't be afraid.*"

Does Joseph sound like Jesus? He does. Jesus could have said these words... and He did... in so many words... and by His actions. Jesus said, "You intended to harm me..." to those who sought to destroy His ministry, who sought to destroy Him. He said these words to those claiming He had a demon, or those who were angry that He ate with sinners and tax collectors. You intended evil upon me, said Jesus, to those who were plotting to destroy Him during Holy Week, and those who would sentence Him to be beaten and die, and those who continued to hurl insults at Him and nail Him to that blessed tree. There's a reason why Joseph sounds a lot like Jesus because He is being the ultimate Christ-like example to His brothers – how Jesus treats us. We don't get what we deserve, by grace through faith. Instead we receive underserved mercy in forgiveness and life.

How do you measure greatness? It's a meaningful question, to say the least. It's a question for you at a time when there are so many confusing standards that people are using. This confrontation with greatness in the life of Joseph has the potential of providing some needed help. We can see, with our faith, what greatness truly is. It's blood, and water, and Word. It's faith that God creates. It's life in Christ – lived out in our lives – through the gifts that He provides to you and to others through you. Stand tall, people, so that others can see Christ Jesus as well. Stand tall and let the whole world see the measurement of real greatness – our Lord Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.