

The Greatest Among You

Matthew 23: 1-12

Communion Sunday

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

This week in Los Angeles we have celebrated another championship. The Los Angeles Dodgers have won the World Series! First time in 32 years, since 1988. And they have added to the city's other crowning sports achievement this year, the Lakers' NBA Championship. It's a good year for L.A., at least with respect to sports achievements. We endlessly pursue the competition to determine who will finally be crowned the greatest.

In February 1964, before his title bout with Sonny Liston, Muhammad Ali famously made his 'I Am the Greatest' speech before reporters. "I am the greatest! He'll fall in eight to prove I'm great and if he keeps talking jive, I'll cut it to five." Now that is confidence! Ali won the fight in seven rounds. Every athlete knows you have to step on the field or in the ring or the batter's box with confidence.

We are fascinated with who's on top, who is the greatest, and we're never far from taking our own pulse wondering how we compare with others. Who is the most attractive? Who is "most likely to succeed?" Who has the most beautiful home, the most remarkable kids, the best vacations and the best looking Christmas card pictures? We are constantly measuring our own greatness, but rarely do we measure up. Who is the greatest? So here in our text, Jesus takes up a familiar issue and exposes our pretensions even in our spiritual life. We spend way too much time and energy pretending to be better than we are, instead of actually finding the energy to care more about others than we do ourselves.

What does it take to look back over life and say, "I feel good about what I accomplished! I did not live my life in vain." How can we ensure we are living in such a way that we will be able to reach a conclusion like that?

Many years ago, a psychologist, Abraham Maslow, who completed his graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, studied successful and well-adjusted people. He called them self-

actualized people. And his study led to the development of what is commonly known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Think of a pyramid. The theory posits that at the lowest level, human beings need to meet basic physiological needs like food, water, and sleep. The next level is the need for safety and security; things like a family, health, employment, etc. Then the third level is the need for friendship, intimacy, and relationships. The fourth is our need for self-esteem, confidence, achievement, social recognition, and respect. Finally, at the top of the pyramid, is self-actualization; personal fulfillment, the development of morality, problem-solving skills, spontaneity, and acceptance of things beyond our control. When the Psalmist claims in Psalm 23 "my cup overflows," there is an acknowledgement that life is filled full.

According to Maslow's theory, when a human being ascends the levels of the hierarchy, having fulfilled the needs in the hierarchy, they may eventually achieve personal fulfillment. Late in life, Maslow came to conclude that self-actualization was not an automatic outcome of satisfying the other human needs. In other words, people can get stuck along the way.

Most of us don't have to worry about our next meal or where we are going to sleep tonight; so many of us have already moved on to the mid-range level of needs. We are interested in things like material success and the approval of people we respect. But this text in Matthew says Jesus saw people in his day getting stuck at the mid-range level. People just like you and me, people looking for a good life but never really moving on to find it because they were stuck surviving rather than thriving.

Two centuries ago, some of them played the same games I'm tempted to play. They didn't drive Tesla's, BMWs, or wear Armani suits, but they had their own ways of asserting themselves. The way they dressed was designed to distinguish themselves and their success. They made broad phylacteries and enlarged the borders of their garments. They loved to be seen in the best seats at important occasions at places equivalent to Disney Hall or the Staples Center, or SoFI Stadium in Jerusalem. They were good people, for the most part, not villains. Jesus points out no great crime committed here. They were just people playing the same games lots of us play, even with their religion. We want other people to respect us and to think well of us. But the game comes with certain risks.

A few years ago, Ruth Whippman's article appeared in the Sunday Review of the *New York Times*. She is the author of "America the Anxious, How Our Pursuit of Happiness is Creating a Nation of Nervous Wrecks." In the article she tells the story of arriving in America from Britain "friendless and lonely." So, she researched apps for her phone that could cheer her up. She knew no one and felt alone.

The app she eventually chose messaged her every hour or so with a positive affirmation that she was supposed to repeat to herself over and over. "I am beautiful," or "I am enough." She writes, "The problem was, every time the phone buzzed with an incoming message, I would get a Pavlovian jolt of excitement thinking an actual person was trying to contact me. 'I am enough,' I would snarl bitterly upon realizing the truth, unable to shake the feeling that, without friends or community, I really wasn't."¹

"Happiness comes from within," said the inspirational photo-card in her Facebook news feed a few days later. Having spent the last few years researching and writing a book about happiness and anxiety in America, she noticed that this particular strain of happiness advice — the kind that pitches the search for contentment as an internal, personal quest, divorced from other people — has become increasingly common. Variations include "Happiness is determined not by what's happening around you, but what's happening inside you"; "Happiness should not depend on other people"; and the perky and socially shareable "Happiness is an inside job." One email she received from a self-help mailing list even doubled down on the idea with the turbocharged word mash-up "withinwards."

She writes, "In an individualistic culture powered by self-actualization, the idea that happiness should be engineered from the inside out, rather than the outside in, is slowly taking on the status of a default truism. This is happiness framed as journey of self-discovery, rather than the natural byproduct of engaging with the world; a happiness that stresses emotional independence rather than interdependence; one based on the idea that meaningful contentment can be found only by a full exploration of the self, a deep dive into our innermost souls and the intricacies and tripwires of our own personalities. Step 1: Find Yourself. Step 2: Be Yourself."

¹ Whippman, Ruth, "Happiness is Other People", *New York Times Sunday Review* October 27, 2017

This isolationist philosophy is showing up not just in the way that many Americans talk about happiness, but in how they spend their time. People who study these things have observed a marked increase in solitary happiness pursuit activities carried out either completely alone or in a group without interaction — with the explicit aim of keeping each person locked in her own private emotional experience. And this was before the pandemic!

Spiritual and religious practice is slowly shifting from a community-based endeavor to a private one, with silent meditation retreats, mindfulness apps and yoga classes replacing church socials and collective worship. The self-help industry — with its guiding principle that the search for happiness should be an individual, self-focused enterprise — is booming, with Americans spending more than one billion dollars on self-help books a year to help guide them on their inner journeys. Meanwhile, “self-care” has become the new going out.

For some, even worship becomes a private affair without interaction, especially now that we are primarily worshipping from home. Churches begin to look more like exercise classes, with everyone in their own private world, the equivalent of having headphones on while taking a spinning class with the pastor as the motivational instructor attempting to help you become your best self. We become isolated even in groups of people. Instead of reaching out to others we compare ourselves to others and measure ourselves by others. Where is God in all of that? Is that really what Jesus is calling us to be about?

While placing more and more emphasis on seeking happiness within, Americans in general are spending less and less time actually connecting with other people. We are self-absorbed. But apparently that is nothing particularly new, only the expression of it is new. Jesus called it out when he saw it among the religious officials of his day.

Back a few chapters in Matthew 18 the disciples came to Jesus and asked him, “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” He called a child and put him before them as a positive example and said, “Unless you change and become like children, you’ll never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest . . .” Now he illustrates a similar point except with the negative example of the religious officials before them. These ones

look the part but miss the point. Externally they have the packaging but none of the substance. I've got to be careful here – because when it comes to religious officials I fit the category.

Hypocrites come in all shapes and sizes. A title doesn't always mean substance. You can have eminence without competence. We often engage in our own form of hypocrisy, pretending to care about others when really we are only self-serving, seeking to improve the quality of our own life, not the quality of their lives.

Often, I would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism. When Jesus talks about scribes and Pharisees he is talking about good people who get stuck and never move beyond their need for approval and recognition. Who is the greatest? The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This week we have an election to determine who will be the next President of the United States. I recently had the occasion to attend a Webinar hosted by the Trinity Forum entitled, “Preserving Democracy Amidst Deep Division” with Dr. Robert P. George and Dr. Cornel West. You can probably find it on YouTube and it would be worth the effort. In the set up for the discussion, Cherie Harder, the host for the discussion described our current context. The question being wrestled with in this conversation:

“How do we preserve liberal democracy in the midst of deep division? Even as we are rapidly becoming a more religiously, ethnically, racially, sociologically, and certainly politically diverse nation, we're also becoming an angrier, more alienated and polarized one. As our differences have waxed, it seems our ability to engage them constructively have waned. Recent polls have shown that even as we the people often expressed ideologically incoherent points of view, we're united to our political tribe not based on agreement on policy or principle or even shared affection, but rather an increased fear and loathing of those on the other side. . . The very nature of liberal democracy and certainly our republic requires a willingness to respect, work with, live with, and love those with whom we disagree. At a time when our political difference seems to deep, and the stakes are so high, how do we live out our deepest convictions and live together as friends, neighbors and fellow citizens. And how do we find the 'unum' amidst the 'pluribus,' and preserve democracy amidst deep difference?”

Robert George opined that with so much attention on “identity” meaning identity politics that leads to cancel culture and support for the tribe no matter the ends or the means (the tribe must be right always!). By contrast the need for “integrity” is essential and paramount. The need to respect and affirm the dignity of every human being is essential and paramount. Asked to reflect on how these two speakers with such opposite views on so many of the social issues of the day have formed and can maintain such a close friendship, Dr. George shared that Cornel West’s “integrity” has provided the basis for trust which has allowed him to listen to, learn from, challenge, explore, and remain friends in the exchange. They love one another as brothers. This Roman Catholic and self-described “Funky Baptist” have both found a way, despite their differences, to sustain a friendship that bridges every divide.

At the heart of their friendship is character that expresses itself in humility and integrity. Christian virtues! We need people to lift up these virtues in churches and schools, in government and business, but more than that, we need people to embody them, to be examples of them, “exemplars” of how to live with integrity and humility, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Jesus doesn’t ask me to solve all the world’s problems, but he asks me to get on my feet and do something for others: to stand beside a single parent struggling to survive, or take a stand with those who are seeking to help the marginalized, the poor, the homeless. Maybe it is as simple as making myself available to someone: a friend or co-worker, who is lonely or confused. Or maybe it involves walking across the street to greet someone, someone who may need encouragement or kindness. We don’t come here to church to feel good about ourselves. This is the place where we can get together with the Lord and feel the thrill of the Spirit energizing us for action in someone else’s life. Only then will our cups overflow. Only then will we know fulfillment.

These simple virtues that our Lord calls us to are the antidote for a divided nation. We have a vaccine for this pandemic — our self-absorption pandemic. Don’t get stuck in the mid-level of the hierarchy looking for social recognition. Move on to actual care and concern for others, even those with whom you disagree. “The greatest among you will be your servant.” In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

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