

Greatness, What's That?

Mark 10:35-45

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

March 22, 2015 – Fifth Sunday of Lent



Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. What do you think – or who do you think of – when you think about greatness and glory? Do you think about Babe Ruth dropping a home run over the back fence of Yankee Stadium, Richard Petty driving his way into the NASCAR history books, or Joe Namath's illustrious career in the NFL? Maybe Bill Gates come to mind, or Sylvester Stallone, or Stephen Spielberg. Well, you get the idea. Most everyone has their own version of what constitutes greatness and glory. For some it means power, prestige, popularity, and possessions – winning American Idol, a movie deal, making a good investment, being at the head of the class, or any number of things. Greatness and glory are what James and John were after – favored seating at the heavenly banquet hall. And, they were bold enough to ask Jesus to give it to them.

But was it not strange that they would make their request at this particular moment? Jesus *had* just told His disciples *for the third time* that He was going to Jerusalem to be tried, crucified and resurrected, but they apparently didn't get it. They don't seem to have heard a word He said. Jesus announced He was going to Jerusalem to die, which prompted them ask about the seating arrangements at the banquet following. They acted as if Jesus owed them a favor. If it wasn't blind ambition or a relentless pursuit of honor and glory for its own sake that caused them to ask Jesus to give them this thing, then I don't know what it looks like.

Sadly, the same thing is at work in us, driving us to elevate ourselves by climbing on the backs of others in a merciless pursuit of "success" at all costs. What we don't understand, though, is that greatness and glory can't be pursued as a goal. If you're after greatness and glory, you'll never get them. You'll spend your entire life chasing after them – and in the end you'll have nothing to show for it. James and John understood neither greatness nor glory. That was why Jesus said to them: "You don't know what you're asking." There was a cup to drink and a Baptism to fulfill – Jesus' death on the cross, the shining moment of His greatness when He would come into His glory on a cross between two criminals. These criminals were the ones appointed by the Father to share in Jesus' glory, because His glory was to be found in His sacrifice for sinners on Calvary. And of course, James and John didn't understand that part at all.

Just like the other disciples, they were still looking at all this in terms of the greatness and glory of the world.

That's why the other disciples became indignant and started bickering among themselves. Look at what's going on in our own world today – greed dominating more and more businesses, politicians scrambling over one another in pursuit of power and wealth, and family members seeking control over everyone else in the family. You can see it in the Church wherever power is exercised – on Boards, or in voters assemblies. It's usually excused as "the business side" side of Church affairs. But there are no such categories as sacred or secular, spiritual or material, eternal or temporal, because truth be known, it *all* belongs to the Lord. Did Jesus not warn His disciples against acting like the Gentiles by lording it over others so everyone would know who's the boss? He said to them: "It shall not be so among you!"

As a Church body which at times has taken on the ways of business and politics, has District Presidents rather than shepherding bishops, directors instead of deacons, flow charts and power structures in place of fasting, prayer, and obedience to God's Word, that's more comfortable with the ways of Wall Street than the narrow way of sacrifice and the cross, we need to hear this Word and take it to heart – namely, that it should not be so among us. When we find ourselves getting too big for our britches, bickering about who's in charge, or who's answerable to whom – whenever we find ourselves thinking in terms of personal power, control, honor and glory, our Lord's leveling "No" needs to ring in our ears: "It must not be so among you."

Greatness and glory in the kingdom of God is the greatness and glory of wood, nails, body and blood. It's the greatness of self-sacrifice. So, if you want to know what greatness looks like, look to the cross, where the Son of God, divested of His divine honor and glory, put on the robes of a servant, bent down to wash the feet of His disciples, extended His arms in death, and gave His own lifeblood for the life of the world. Greatness to God means Him making Himself obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. No wonder Jesus said to James and John: "You don't know what you're asking."

Jesus had a cup to drink – the cup of God's wrath poured out against sin. And He drank it to the bottom on our behalf. He had a Baptism to fulfill – a Baptism which put him on the road to Jerusalem and the cross, where He died as the Sinner, "poured out His life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors." *This* is the greatness of God and His glory – the greatness of suffering servanthood and the glory of the cross.

Greatness means not being lord and master, but servant and slave of all – giving your life in service to others. To be first in line is to take your place with the slaves at the back of the line. Luther taught that Christians are at one and the same time completely free – slave to no one – yet completely bound – the servant of all. In other words, Christ has freed us to serve others even as He served us.

Greatness in the kingdom of God, then, is the greatness of servanthood. God came down to us. He reached all the way down out of heaven to us. And what that means is that if you want to serve God, you don't reach up, but down, because the real place of honor is not above but below – is found not in self-service, but in self-sacrifice, as you give yourself away to others in the name of Christ. One of President John Kennedy's most frequently quoted sayings is: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." The *Small Catechism* expressed this same thought a long time before John Kennedy came along – only it spoke this way about *all* the spheres of one's life. To paraphrase the *Catechism* we might say: "Ask not what your Church can do for you, but what you can do for your Church." "Ask not what your family can do for you, but what you can do for your family." "Don't ask: 'What will I get out of it? What reward is there for me? Or, how will this improve my position?' But instead: 'What can I give? How can I help? How can I give myself away?'"

No work should be beneath the dignity of the disciple of Him who works from below – that is, of the God who reached down from heaven to be born in a manger and die on a cross. Do you want to experience the greatness and glory of the kingdom of God? Then in faith visit the sick, comfort the dying, give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, care for the orphaned, the widowed, and the poor. Visit the imprisoned. Love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you. When you think of greatness and glory, think of Mary, who gave up her wedding plans, her name, her reputation – indeed, her entire life – to say "Yes" to the Word of God so that she might bear His Incarnate Promise into the world. Think of Paul, well on his way to greatness as a rabbi – as a Pharisee among Pharisees – who gave up everything to serve the One he once persecuted. Think of the woman who gives up personal ambition to be a mother to her children, or the man who gives up promotions and raises in favor of spending time with his family – who gives up his one day to sleep in so his family can come to hear God's Word.

The greatness and glory of Jesus Christ is the greatness and glory of self-sacrifice. It's the greatness and glory of the Suffering Servant spoken of by the Prophet Isaiah. It was God's will that Christ suffer as the Guilt-Offering for

the sin of the world. Therefore God says, "I will give Him a portion among the great, and He will divide the spoils with the strong, because He poured out His life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for them." But the greatness of servanthood isn't something you stir up in yourself. It isn't some kind of self-help through self-sacrifice plan. It's the work of God. It's the life of Christ lived in and through us. Jesus promised James and John that they would be Baptized with His Baptism and drink from His cup. Hence He was Baptized into our death so that we might be Baptized into His death and immersed in His life. He drank the cup of suffering so that we might drink the cup of blessing – His blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins.

But you might be saying: "I can't do this. I can't give myself up like that!" And that's true. You can't. First you have to die. Christ first has live in and through you, for He came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. Here in the Liturgy Jesus comes to us, not to be served, but to serve us with His gifts – His Word, His body and His blood, His blessing, death and life for our salvation. He comes to be our Servant – and then He sends us out in peace to our neighbor – again, not to be served, but to serve as we have been served. Baptism and the Lord's Supper do that to us. We are put into Christ in Baptism, and Christ is put into us in the precious Sacrament of His body and blood.

Through all this we are made to be "icons" of Christ for our neighbor – an image which makes visible what's otherwise hidden – a little window, if you will, into the heavenly realms. Holy Scripture calls Jesus the "Icon of the invisible God," because Jesus makes the invisible God visible to us. He reveals God to us. And when we bend down to serve our neighbor – reach down in sacrifice to others with a confession of faith upon our lips as well as working in our members – we are likewise an icon of Christ – a picture of Jesus – for our neighbor. As we give of ourselves and speak of the One who sends us, the world is then able to see a little bit of the Christ who gave Himself for the life of the world. So, if you want to learn what greatness and glory are, be Baptized with Jesus' Baptism, and drink deeply from Jesus' cup. Let His Baptism and cup have their way with you – as they kill you to yourself and your sin, and make you alive to God in the life of Jesus who is in you. He is the One who came as Servant – not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many – and especially for you. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.