

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2020
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Matthew 20:17-28 Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, **18** “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death **19** and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”

20 Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

21 “What is it you want?” he asked.

She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

22 “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”

“We can,” they answered.

23 Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, 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 by my Father.”

24 When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. **25** Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **26** Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **27** and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— **28** just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

“Greatness on Display”

To give myself a break from all the political bickering and the get just enough information about the current situation with the pandemic, I sometimes switch over to sport talk radio. Since there aren’t any actual sporting events taking place, there are a lot of silly arguments taking place. Who would win in a game of one-on-one: Michael Jordan or LeBron James? Who is the better quarterback: Joe Montana or Tom Brady? We are curious. And we can argue all day long. But we always feel the need to make these comparisons. It’s not enough to be good. We have to be better than someone. We can’t just celebrate someone’s achievements. We need to prove they are the greatest. And maybe those arguments can be a welcome distraction. But so many times these tone deaf arguments ignore bigger concerns.

But when we turn to Matthew chapter twenty, we get to see true greatness. When we really search out to understand true greatness, we see Jesus. Jesus puts an end to all our rivalries and competitions about our idea of greatness. Jesus doesn’t compare all the articles written or all the phone callers with their opinions. Jesus puts true greatness on display. Jesus shows true greatness by his sacrifice. And Jesus gives that greatness to each one of us. The result is that greatness is on display from Jesus to his people.

These verses at first appear to cover a couple different topics. But a closer investigation shows the exact opposite. There is an essential connection between the prediction Jesus makes and the behavior of his disciples. This isn't the first time Jesus predicts the ultimate goal of his life and ministry. Matthew has recorded two previous predictions like this from Jesus (Matthew 16:21; 17:22,23). This time he includes more specifics, more details. Not only will Jesus face betrayal, but **"Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law."** (Matthew 20:18) They won't give him a slap on the wrist or send him packing to Galilee, instead **"They will condemn him to death."** (Matthew 20:18) And they won't be the ones to execute Jesus themselves, but they will cooperate with the occupying authorities: **"and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified."** (Matthew 20:19) There is an obvious clash between what Jesus says at the beginning of this section of Scripture and how his disciples act. Are they oblivious to what Jesus has just said? Whatever the explanation, they completely miss the entire point of Jesus' life and ministry. They are disciples of Jesus, yet they completely swing and miss on what greatness means from a Christian perspective.

I think this explains why the other disciples were so annoyed with James and John, why they are more than just suffering minor irritations. When the mother of James and John asked Jesus to do her sons the favor of giving them positions of honor and authority, I think the other disciples were jealous. They wish they had thought of this favor first. They wish their mommy had been available to run to Jesus like some kind of sports agent making the case why they should get the big contract. They want someone else to say exactly what they are thinking in a way that won't make it look embarrassing to themselves.

I think all the disciples were suffering from fear of being the last one picked for kickball with team Jesus. If you have ever been the last one picked or not gotten picked at all, you know how that feels. You feel anger and resentment, bitterness and sadness. Anger at the team captains who didn't pick you. Resentment because you know you are better than some of the ones who got picked ahead of you. Bitterness because they didn't see your true ability. Sadness because they might be right. Sadness when your self-esteem deflates because you can recognize your lack of prowess on the kickball field. It's not enough to be good or to know you are good. You have to be better than someone else. You have to be recognized as more deserving than the others.

Maybe you're not a super-competitive person. Maybe you could never picture yourself being so bold as to ask this huge favor from Jesus. Let's say you need something from God. Let's say you are depending on God's approval and generosity to you. And to get what you want from God you feel like you have to boost yourself. You have to make yourself look good, look better, more deserving, more worthy. Let's say God is like the new delivery truck pulling up to Wal-Mart with a new shipment of supplies. You have to get some of those choice cuts of meat or luxuriously soft rolls of toilet paper. There are 80 people in line in front of you, but the last packages of beef and bathroom tissue are just coming off the truck. You know you would make your case to God. You would have something to say about yourself.

You could mention all the times you have given up your Sunday mornings to be in God's house. You could tell him all the times you sacrificed more money or more convenience to obey uncomfortable commandments while everyone else disregards them. You didn't go into that strip club with your buddies. You didn't cheat on the test. You didn't share the gossip. You could tell God how consistently you have been studying your Bible and how often you have prayed for people in need. You could even tell God that you would have done a better job at your spiritual performance if things had been easier. You go to church a lot, but there are always family emergencies calling you away so you can't come every Sunday. You do a devotion occasionally, but your house is always chaotic and doesn't allow you to concentrate for more than 30 seconds at a time. Even if you aren't first in line, even if you aren't the absolute best, you are still deserving of getting these prized and honored gifts from God.

We suffer from the same underlying attitude that the disciples all demonstrated. We'd like to say we aren't nearly as silly as they were. In his book *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis explains why pride is more dangerous than greed or selfishness. Those things, he says, are actually the results of pride. Pride is what causes us to be blatantly oblivious to the way Jesus operates in our hyper-competitive world. Pride is what propels us to boost our qualifications before God. And Lewis summarizes why pride is so dangerous: "For pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of life, or contentment, or even common sense." (*Mere Christianity*, p. 125)

Pride is behind so many examples of greatness we see today. In our society greatness is recognized when someone claws their way to the top and then starts to give back. They are first noticed for their achievements, recognized for their success and then celebrated when they have the luxury and privileged position to give it away.

Jesus has a different starting place. And a different definition of greatness. Jesus goes up to Jerusalem fully realizing that success for him means suffering. Jesus gathers his disciples privately to let them know his greatness will come from betrayal and condemnation, mockery and brutal whipping, and eventually his shameful execution.

Jesus is the antidote to your pride and mine. Jesus knows the tendencies of human nature to scheme for power, honor and authority. Jesus knows how easily his own followers slip into spiritually selfish attitudes. Jesus knows you can't count on your own efforts at humility or your neighbor's sense of duty. We will all put ourselves first. Jesus knows he is the only one. Jesus is the only one who has an answer. Jesus knows the answer is betrayal and condemnation. Jesus knows he will experience mockery, flogging, and vile crucifixion for selfish and proud sinners. Jesus knows it needs to be done and he has to do it. Jesus knows this is the way to pay the ransom price. Jesus knows it will cost the price of his own blood to free you from your slavery to pride. Jesus will give up his own life to rescue you from the chains of perpetually trying to boost your status that keep you locked in sin's dungeon. Jesus will come to free you from being a hostage of trying to be good enough or even good enough for God. Your perfect Savior has to give his own flawless life to pay the ultimate price to purchase your life.

True greatness is found in Christ. Your greatness comes from Jesus Christ. You are freed from trying to be great because in Jesus you are already great. You are freed to show and radiate and share the greatness that is yours in Jesus Christ.

Research shows and employers realize you are better when you get a break. If you ever get into a cycle where you are working 6 or 7 days a week, you know how refreshing it is to get an extra day off. Employers even realize their workers will be more productive when they get to take a vacation, a week or more away from the job. Whether you are working more in the past week or you are stuck at home, I think we could all use a break. When we have health concerns and social contagions on our minds constantly, it starts to wear us down. We are more anxious and less energetic. We are less sympathetic and less generous in our dealings with other people. We are more worried about ourselves.

But what if you didn't have to be? What if you didn't have to be so concerned about yourself? I'm not suggesting that you shouldn't wash your hands thoroughly or keep a safe distance from people outside your immediate family. What I am saying is Jesus has given his people true freedom. True freedom from worry about yourself. Jesus has secured your ultimate freedom when he paid the ransom price for you. Jesus has given you true freedom from having to fight and scratch to get ahead. Jesus has given up his own life to give you what you could never earn on your own. Jesus has given you freedom from having to compete with others for a place at God's side. Jesus came to serve. Jesus puts you in the honored position of being a spiritual VIP receiving his attention, his devotion, his acceptance.

That greatness from Christ allows you to be great. You can be satisfied in what you have from Jesus without being lazy. You can be content with the gifts from God while still striving for spiritual excellence. C.S. Lewis goes on to explain humility is the antidote to pride. And if you ever meet the most humble person in the world, you probably wouldn't even realize it. Because she is so secure in what God has given her, she won't have to prove herself to you. She won't have to focus on herself. She will be so focused on you because she won't be thinking about herself at all. (Mere Christianity, p. 128) You won't realize how humble she is because she isn't drawing any attention to herself.

Who is getting left off the kickball team today? Who doesn't even get a chance to get in line for the delivery truck now? The way of Jesus is the way of service and sacrifice. The best way to take a break from your anxiety over the unknown is to consider who needs the comfort and assurance of Jesus as much if not more than you do. Someone lonely and isolate. Someone who feels like they don't even want to trudge out to the kickball field because of their lack of qualifications. Someone who would never get in line for a shipment of goods from God because they don't think they are good enough. They need the greatness of Jesus given to them by another caring Christian.

How can I be a successful christian or church? Throw away every other measurement of success. Find your greatness in Jesus. Feel your full freedom in what Jesus willingly, sacrificially did for you. And whether it is ever recognized or not, that's the greatness you and I get to put on display every day. Amen.