

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Mark 10: 35-45

*³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." ³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. ³⁷ They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." ³⁸ "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" ³⁹ "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with," ⁴⁰ 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." ⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴² Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, *whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,* ⁴⁴ *and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.* ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

What is it about airport waiting areas that brings out the worst in people? On one particular day, bad weather had caused delays and cancellations throughout the system. Hundreds of anxious travelers were on standby. One of these passengers, a senior business executive, was desperate to get on a plane so he wouldn't be late for a meeting. He kept crowding the counter, trying to get the airline staff to do something to move his name higher up the standby list.

The agent had just put down the microphone, having said to the crowd for the third or fourth time: "Those of you who are on standby, please sit down and we will call your name when we have a seat for you."

But this was a man who would not take "maybe" for an answer. He kept pestering the agent, explaining how important it was that he get on the next flight. Finally, in exasperation, he asked her, "Do you know who I am?"

The agent had had enough. Picking up the microphone, she announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a man here who does not know who he is. Would someone please claim him, offer him a seat in the waiting area, and tell him I'll talk to him when it's his turn?"

To be great or to be Great—that is the question for this morning. What does it mean to be a great person? Throughout history we have deemed some people as being "great." There's Alexander the Great, who was the Macedonian king and general who took control of the vast Persian Empire in the 4th century B.C. Tutored by Aristotle, he went on to achieve an undefeated record in military battles. But Alexander was not invincible -- he was probably brought down by a lowly mosquito. Evidence suggests that he died of malaria at age 32.

Also in history we have Catherine the Great who was the empress who ruled Russia from 1762 to 1796. Her greatness was grounded in her modernization and expansion of Russia's holdings, and her creation of the country's first school for girls. But Catherine was not as powerful as she thought. Her rise to domination came only after her lover led a coup to get rid of her husband.

History teaches that greatness is often linked to a life of illusion, one which causes people to believe that they are more invincible, powerful and righteous than they really are.

Now, how about those disciples—James and John? What were they thinking asking Jesus to be seated as a royal? In the Gospel of Matthew, we are told that their mother made this request of Jesus; however, many theologians believe Matthew added that information in order to make James and John look better.

What made them think they deserved such a special honor any more than the other disciples or anyone else? What made them so great? Sure, it seems, they were part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples. They are mentioned several times in the scripture—maybe just as much as Simon Peter—and definitely a lot more than Bartholomew.

Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" People were always asking Jesus for something; however, people didn't always get what they wanted. James and John didn't get exactly what they wanted

either. In this case, before Jesus actually answered them, he told them that they did not understand the weightiness for what they were asking.

Apparently, even though Jesus tried to explain throughout his time with the disciples, who he was through his words and actions, they just didn't understand. They were taught that one day a Messiah would come and free the Israelites from their oppressors, and this Messiah would establish his new physical kingdom here on earth. It was in this kingdom that James and John wanted to be Jesus' second-hand men.

But that is not the kind of Messiah Jesus was and that was not the kind of kingdom Jesus came to establish. It was not about palaces, thrones, and armies. Christ's kingdom was in the hearts of his followers and for this kingdom. Jesus told James and John that God was the only one who could appoint anyone to be in positions of authority. Jesus wanted to impress upon the disciples that even he answered to God.

Jesus then asked James and John if they felt they could handle the same kind of challenges and hardships that Jesus needed to face. What Jesus actually asked them is, "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

When Jesus mentioned the cup, the disciples identified this with a custom that took place at royal banquets. The king would hand a cup to his guests. The cup here mentioned by Jesus was a metaphor for the life and experience that God handed out to people. The metaphor of a cup is used in this way many times in the bible. For example, in psalm 23:5, the psalmist says, "my cup runneth over," referring to the life and experiences of happiness God has given him.

And in Isaiah 51:17, the prophet thinking of the many disasters that came upon the people of Israel, explains them as happenings "at the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath." So, "the cup" speaks of the experiences chosen for people by God.

The verb baptism in the Greek is "baptize in" meaning to dip. The past participle (now there's a blast from the past grammar term) as it is used here changes the meaning to "submerged"—to be submerged in any experience. For example, a person addicted to drugs is said to be submerged in drugs. A grief-stricken person is said to be submerged in mourning. So, Jesus was asking the disciples if they could face or handle being submerged in pain, hatred, even death.

They were confident they could but once again, they did not understand that Jesus' journey was only going to get more and more difficult. He was going to suffer horrible torture, shame, ridicule and death. Jesus, however, knew that in fact they would one day suffer for their faith and their work of spreading the Good News after he was gone. We read in Acts 12:2 that James died a martyr's death. He was beheaded by Herod Agrippa. And in Revelation 1:9 we learn that John did not die for his faithful ongoing discipleship, but he was exiled to Patmos.

Of course, James and John did not yet know that these things were going to happen to them. It was easy in that very moment when they were having this conversation with Jesus to say that they were sure they could handle anything. Yet, while Jesus was dying on the cross without any question in his greatest hour of need, they were nowhere to be found. It wasn't until after his resurrection that they finally understood all of Jesus' message and what it really meant to be great.

It's just as easy for us to say that we are willing to endure anything for Christ, but if the time comes for us to do that, we sometimes complain. It is easy to criticize the disciples, but like them some people want to be admired and praised for being a Christian and that's it. They really don't want to be bothered with the parts of the discipleship job description because it makes them feel uncomfortable and it sometimes requires hardship. If we are willing to suffer, we must be willing to put up with even the most minor of irritations that arise while doing God's will.

We read later in the story that the rest of Jesus' disciples found out about James and John's request, and they were not too happy with the two of them. They probably were hurt and offended. What made James and John think that they were any better than the rest of them? Imagine Jesus' disappointment as he listened to his friends argue. Imagine the frustration he must have felt because of their lack of understanding who he was and his mission. But Jesus did not come down hard on them. Instead, he used the moment as a teaching opportunity.

Jesus explained to the disciples that true greatness comes in serving others—not in crowns, thrones and armies. I don't know whether they totally understood this, but they certainly in time came to understand what Jesus meant.

The disciple Peter wrote later in 1 Peter 5:1-4, "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

But Peter also recognized eventually that it was not just the elders called to be servants. Remember, when Jesus died, the temple curtain was torn in two, signifying that now people could come directly to God through the great High Priest, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 4:14-16). There are now no earthly mediators between God and man as existed in the Old Testament priesthood (1 Timothy 2:5).

Peter taught this lesson about being the priesthood of all believers. We can read about it in (1 Peter 2:5-9): "You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light". So as a priesthood of all believers, our call is to be like that of our high priest—Jesus, the Christ.

Most businesses, organizations, and institutions measure greatness by high personal achievement. Society in general has adopted this same notion. In Christ's kingdom, however, service is the way to get ahead. The desire to be on top will hinder, not help. Rather than seeking to have your needs met, look for ways that you can minister to the needs of others.

These believers found a need where they could serve others. On Friday nights, volunteers from Bridgetown Ministries help the homeless people gathered under the Burnside Bridge in Portland, Oregon. In addition to providing hot meals, shaves and haircuts, some of the volunteers wash the homeless people's feet.

Tom Krattenmaker, a writer for USA Today, was stunned when he saw that, calling it "one of the most audacious acts of compassion and humility I have ever witnessed." This group of society's outcasts had their bare feet immersed in warm water, scrubbed, dried, powdered, and placed in clean socks.

One man reported with a smile, "I can't find the words to describe how good that felt." Krattenmaker later wrote, "Washing someone's feet is an act best performed while kneeling. Given the washer's position, and the unpleasant appearance and the odor of a homeless person's feet, it's hard to imagine an act more humbling."

The leader of Bridgetown Ministries prepares volunteers for this ministry by saying, "When you go out there tonight, I want you to look for Jesus. You might see him in the eyes of a drunken person, a homeless person. we're just out there to love on people."

This is an example of what Jesus was talking about. Jesus, God's only Son, is the perfect example of what it means to be great. He is the perfect example of servanthood. He served others throughout his life among us and through his death on the cross. His death was an act of incredible service. He gave all he had as a ransom for our sin. This is the price he paid so that we can be free of sin and death.

In comparison to this act of service, none of us has anything to complain about when we are asked to serve in even the smallest of ways. Jesus is the true model of what it means to be great. So, the question we are left with is, do we want to be great by our society's standards or do we want to be great in the eyes of God?

Today is the second Sunday of our stewardship emphasis. It is a time when we reflect upon the gifts and talents God has given us; and consider how or even whether we will use them for God's purposes of serving others and helping to build his kingdom. It is our goal as Christians to be great in the eyes of God, giving God all the honor and glory through our ministries offered through our shared calling at HCOB.

That is not to negate the sharing of our gifts through efforts in our everyday life outside of the planned church ministries. The use of our talents are to be an extension of Christ's love and service through all our living. But as a family, bound together by the love and sacrifice of Christ, brought to this community of fellowship at HCOB, we have a responsibility and calling to receive the cup and be submerged in service, using

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our gifts and talents for spiritual growth, actions of outreach—whatever God calls us to do, all for the glory of God.

How will we do that in the future? That is an ongoing journey of discovery we welcome with anticipation and willingness. What talents will we give as an offering for serving through the ministries of HCOB? Are we prepared and open to receiving awareness to new talents others may see in us? Will we give our talents to be submerged in God's purposes?

You have a special opportunity today to think about that and share your willingness to share your talents through the ministries of what we do together. You each have in your possession a time and talent survey (including those who received the online bulletin and are worshiping on FB Live). During the offering time, I would like you to pull that form out and complete it and put it in the offering plate before you leave today. If you don't feel you can complete it now, you can take it with you and put it in the offering plate next Sunday, or send it to the church. But please do not put it down somewhere and neglect to do it. Please consider stretching yourself into new areas of ministry if you feel you have gifts and talents to do something. Remember, we are all called in big and in small ways to serve our Lord and Savior.

Let us pray: God, we thank you for the gifts and talents you have bestowed upon us. We thank you for opportunities to use these through our daily living. We thank you for our church and the ministries to which you have called us to fulfill. Send your Spirit within each of us now as we consider how you might be calling us, challenging us where we are being stubborn, and help us to step forward, expressing willingly our desire to serve through the church's ministries. Amen.