

“Come, Serve with Me”

Introduction: A few months ago, Forbes magazine came out with its annual rankings of the top 500 colleges and universities in America, based on the educational, financial, and career outcomes of its graduates. For the second year in a row, Princeton University was able to claim, “We’re number 1.” In just a few short weeks we will be casting our votes for a number of different candidates. Those who get the most votes will be able to declare, “We’re number 1.” And, in just a few short days, Major League Baseball’s World Series will begin. The winner of the most games out of seven will then be able to cry, “We’re number 1.”

Declaring that you are number 1 is important to many people. Such a ranking, we’re led to believe, gives us a sense of value and worth, a sense of greatness. But, what is it that determines greatness? Is it career success? Is it the number of votes received? Is it the number of games won? Those who were falling into step with Jesus had an issue here. Two in particular, James and John, wanted Jesus to give them places of honor in his kingdom when he assumed the throne of the world, places from which they could lord it over others and declare that they were great.

As we will hear, their desire for greatness was greatly misplaced, and Jesus used the opportunity to do some teaching around what true greatness is all about. Greatness, Jesus wants us to know, is not defined by worldly status or power but by humble service.

I. Processing Desire

A. This request by James and John came as Jesus and his disciples were making their way to Jerusalem. Jesus had just, for the third time, spelled out for his disciples the tragic aspect of his vocation that awaited him there. He was to be arrested, tried, mocked, spit upon, flogged, and crucified. Then, he would rise. But, as was typical for these fellows, they were slow on the uptake. Even worse, as Jesus finished talking about what he was going to give, James and John pulled out the shopping list they had brought with them of all they wanted to get. They wanted honor and glory and power. They wanted greatness, achieved, they reasoned, by being given positions of great significance with Jesus.

B. In response to their request, I am grateful for the approach we see Jesus take. Like with the rich, young, ruler, who said he’d kept all of the commandments since he was a kid, and instead of laughing at him Jesus looked at him and loved him, Jesus here sought to help James and John work out their misplaced desire. Instead of laughing at them and saying, “how could you even ask this...haven’t you been listening to me?!” Jesus said, “What do you want me to do for you?” In other words, let’s talk about it.

We hear Jesus ask this question on several different occasions. He does so, I think, because he knows that desire is such a key component to our spiritual life and growth. What does our heart truly long for? Being able to name that, so we can work through it with Jesus, is important, even when that desire is greatly misplaced, or needs tweaking in some way.

C. To begin that process with James and John, Jesus goes on to ask them about the cup and baptism that awaited him, and, by extension, all who followed him. It represented his suffering and

death. Their answer – “yes, no problem, we can do that” – was truly misplaced. Greatness, this pair reasoned, wasn’t really that difficult to achieve. “It might be tough sledding for a bit but in the end, we’ll come out on top,” they seemed to be thinking. Meanwhile, when the other ten disciples began to clue into the fact that these two were pursuing glory for themselves, they were indignant. Not that they had decided to take the high moral ground; they, too, wanted to be great and were mad that James and John had gotten a head start!

Interestingly, and maybe not surprisingly, this was not the first time that achieving greatness had been an issue. A bit earlier (days? weeks?), right after the second time Jesus had informed them about his upcoming suffering and death, we see the disciples arguing. Mark describes it this way:

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” [Mk. 9:33-37]

The lesson was clear. True greatness, and even more than that – fellowship with the Father and Son – comes from humble and loving service, pictured here by Jesus as welcoming those who were marginalized in ancient society. – little children.

D. But the lesson had obviously not stuck. So, when the issue surfaced again, Jesus decided that it was time to call a timeout and have another group “huddle.” When he had gathered them together, he began by pointing out how the world defines greatness, which he illustrated by pagan, political rulers lording it over and exercising authority over their subjects. These rulers had status while those under them did not. And that has always been the way the world defines greatness – by status: How big is your house? How big is your truck? How big is your office? How many people report to you? How many super bowl rings do you have? How powerful is your nation?

E. “Not so with you!” Jesus declared, turning the value system of the world on its head. Greatness, in the economy of the kingdom of God, is defined by humble service, a life lived caring for the least of these, a service exemplified by Jesus who humbled himself, took on the role of a servant, and then took his love for us all the way to a cross, where he gave up his life for us (Phil. 2:1-11) so that we might be forgiven and truly live.

F. What’s wonderful to see is that both James and John came to eventually understand humble, loving service as the way of the cross. John would write: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for others” (1 Jn. 3:16).

What might that look like? Humble service can be broadly expressed. In our homes, it may mean caring for an ageing parent or a special needs child. In our communities it may mean delivering meals to the hungry, shoveling snow for the housebound, or serving on the PTO. In the world, it may mean supporting the education of kids who live in the slums of Nairobi, of efforts toward peace in Gaza.

What these texts also highlight is that in many cases, humble service will be costly. It may cost us our time, our money, our reputation, our emotional energy, or our ability to do other, seemingly more pleasurable and important things. So, I appreciate the way this holy week prayer describes the way of the cross Jesus calls us to walk as the way life and peace:

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. [*The Book of Common Prayer*, 168]

If then, true greatness is measured by humble, loving service, how ought it to direct us as we seek to live our lives as followers of Jesus. How ought it to direct the lives of the leaders we seek to support?

*Lead on O King Eternal* #448