

Mark 10:32-45

³²They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; ³⁴they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” ³⁹They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Lessons on Greatness October 21, 2018

I was watching the Weather Channel Thursday morning when the most interesting story came on. Did you know that when FEMA is determining the severity of a hurricane's impact on a city, one of the indicators they look at is whether the local Waffle House is open? Apparently, Waffle House has a tradition of being open when everyone else has headed for the hills. They pride themselves in getting ready for a storm because they know people will be hungry and in need after a hurricane or a weather disaster. Well, hurricane Michael was so powerful that even Waffle House couldn't stay open in Panama City, Florida. But Monday morning their mobile food truck rolled into town and set up right next to the mostly destroyed Waffle House sign and began serving food...for free! They got the word out on social media with the hashtag #SmotheredCoveredandRecover, a play on the slang used to order the chain's hash browns.

Now, I couldn't help but think that this falls in the category of what Jesus meant when he said, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.” Yes, yes, I know they are a business, and this will probably be seen as good advertising, but...this is a really generous gift to a community in need and I can't help but think Jesus would approve. People will remember this, I guarantee you. The manager on site said, “We just want to put a smile on people's faces.” Well, let me tell you, it brought a smile to this face. And I can't remember the last time I went to a Waffle House, but at my first opportunity, I'm going. And I'm gonna have them smothered, covered, and any other way they serve them! This is just a glimpse of what greatness looks like to me.

Another story that really brought this reading to life for me occurred back in 2008, when Sara Tucholsky, a college senior, was playing for the championship of the Great Northwest Athletic Conference softball league in Washington State. It wasn't the World Series and there were probably only 100 or so people at the game. If it hadn't been for this story it might have gone unnoticed by the media. It was a beautiful afternoon when in the second inning, with two runners on base, Sara came to bat and hit her first home run ever — the ball sailed right out of the park. Then, rounding the bases, she realized that she had failed to touch first. So, she turned back. But,

through a twist of fate, and her knee, she found herself down on the ground with a torn ligament, crawling in agony back to first base.

It took a moment for anyone to realize what had happened but when they did they were faced with a predicament. According to the rules, if another player took her place it would forfeit the home run and if anyone from her team tried to help her around the bases, she would be automatically called out.

It was the only home run she had ever hit in her softball career and no one understood that more than Mallory Holtman who had more home runs than anyone in the conference, and who played for the other team. Mallory believed that Sara deserved that home run. So Mallory stepped up to help. She and her teammate, Liz Wallace, picked Sara up and carried her around the bases, making sure to tap her left foot on each base.

It was an extremely emotional moment for everyone. The crowd watching was not only cheering but also crying tears of gratitude and surprise, I guess, for this act of selflessness in a game that usually brings out the deepest levels of competitiveness. Especially in a playoff game. Probably won't see this in the World Series.

Mallory and Liz lost the game that day according to the scoreboard, but they clearly showed us what it means to be winners in the life of serving and sacrificing for others. I would like to think that this was not an isolated moment for them but one that permeated all the days of their lives. I think the disciples could have learned something from them, don't you?

Now, I don't know what the sons of Zebedee were thinking. I wonder what led them to believe that they deserved to sit on either side of Jesus in the new Kingdom? I can't tell if this is naivete or sheer bravado; power seeking or just plain ignorance. As we've mentioned before, following Jesus can be risky. Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes "If Jesus were in charge of an average congregation I figure there would be about four people left there on Sunday mornings, and chances are those four would be fooling themselves. Jesus would greet newcomers by saying, "Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this way of life? It will take everything you have. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. Plenty of people have launched out on it without counting the cost, and as you can see they are not here anymore. The other thing is, if you succeed, if you really follow me, it will probably get you killed. Why don't you go home and think it over? I would hate for you to get in over your head."

This is the third time in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus has told them that when they go to Jerusalem he will be beaten, mocked, spit upon, turned over to the authorities, killed, and in three days be raised again, but they are not listening. They have argued over who will be first and last in this new kingdom. Peter called Jesus out for even talking about dying and Jesus called him out right back. He sat little children on his knees to show them what and whom the kingdom was for. He healed a blind man at the start of these predictions and he heals a blind man at the end of the story, and yet, they don't see it. Maybe none of us really see it, and that's why the healing stories of the blind men are so important. Something we will talk about later.

We too are caught up in this competitive, dog eat dog, world. We too strive to be the best and the first. We align ourselves with those who are the most popular and the rich and famous. We are fascinated with shows like, The Voice, Survivor, So You Think You Can Dance, American Ninja, The Bachelor, shows in which regular ordinary people have the chance to become 'Stars' something maybe we all dream about.

A Sunday school teacher had been telling a class of little boys about crowns of glory and heavenly rewards for good people. "Now tell me," the teacher said at the close of the lesson, "In heaven, who will get the biggest crown?" There was silence for a while then Johnny replied, "Him what's got the biggest head!"

We all get the big head sometimes don't we? We are not that dissimilar from James and John this morning. We all probably at one time or another have wanted to be the star of the show and have our fifteen minutes of fame. I

don't think that's a terrible thing but if it is the only thing, then we may have a problem of vision. We may be as blind as the two men that Jesus healed, and part of that healing is to understand that being a servant to others is the path to true life in God.

Jesus tells us that he came to serve and not be served. That is, if you want to be considered great you must become a servant of others; to be first is to be a slave of all. To be first is to be last. It certainly has me thinking about how this plays out in my own life and I hope it causes you to think about it too. In this very competitive world we live in, how do we feel good about not playing the game? How do we strive not to strive, so to speak, and put others at the front of the line all the while finding joy in being at the end of the line? How do we help others around the bases so that they score with our help? What a balancing act that will be for us.

And it doesn't come easily for us does it? Maybe that's why Jesus makes such a point of sitting them down and helping them to understand that as his children we do things differently than the world. We don't do things the Roman way. As his children, we may not even do things the American way. We do things God's way. And sometimes we need a little help doing it.

This is the balancing act that we all have to work on I guess as we live as servants-of-grace in this world. And I know I am speaking to the choir here. I know many servants-souls here who think of others and care for others before thinking about themselves. Not in an unhealthy way, but in a Godly way. We still have to give care to ourselves. Jesus isn't asking us to live emotionally or physically unhealthy lives. We aren't being asked to sacrifice our health. Jesus is asking us to consider that he gave himself as a ransom for many, which frees us to live lives of grace and mercy. Not seeking the power and status of the world per say, but seeking first the kingdom of God. The things that have eternal meaning; caring and serving in little and big ways as we are led to do so.

A story I've shared before is about my good friend from the Crossnore church that some of us refer to as the cookie lady ...I won't tell you her name as she prefers anonymity. Every Sunday, for years, she has taken her sister's soft delicious cookies around to the nursing homes and the hospital or wherever there is someone who needs a visit. She visits with the elderly and sick and sings them a song or a hymn and then gives them a cookie. She has been doing this as long as I've known her.

A few years ago she was honored with an award for her service to the aging and volunteerism, and when I congratulated her on her award she commented that "I didn't have any money to give, but I give them my life." I thought about that for a second and looking at her I said, "Just like Jesus." She replied, "I hope so, I hope so!"

Maybe it is as simple and as difficult as that. That we reflect the love of Christ in—countless casseroles, cakes, cookies, home-made bread, or waffles and hash browns. In gifts of money and resources freely given. In standing up for the oppressed and needy. In compassionate prayer and visits and holding hands...just being with those in distress and need. In these many and various acts of selfless love, we are witnesses to the resurrection and Christ's commandment to love another. To be servants to one another, being both first and last, rounding the bases of life together regardless of which team we are on.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He's not going there to run for public office. He won't be popular. He won't be welcomed with state dinners or paparazzi. He may not want to do it. But he goes because his love for us all is so deep that he can't do otherwise. He came to serve and not to be served. To give his life a ransom for many. And Jesus is always on his way to Jerusalem for our sakes, and he asks us to follow and do as he asks, which is to love one another and become living sacrifices for one another, to become great by becoming the least and last. "To transform the world, not from the top down but from the bottom up, as Barbara Brown Taylor says it. The ultimate trickle-up effect using the strongest stuff in the world: the power to serve."

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.