

**Fourth Sunday in Lent**  
**March 10, AD 2002**  
**"Jesus' Recipe for Greatness"**  
**Matthew 20:26-28**

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

**Matthew 20:26 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."**

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

Name three great Christians. Who comes to mind? Maybe the great apostle to the Gentiles, St. Paul? Or perhaps St. Augustine, the great theologian and defender of orthodoxy in the early church? Or the great Reformer, Dr. Martin Luther?

Based on what Jesus says this morning, I'd like to suggest another list of great Christians, however. I'd like to nominate the Sunday school teacher, who finds time in an already crowded schedule to prepare and present a lesson to her class each week. And I'd like to nominate the member of the altar guild who works behind the scenes to see to it that we're prepared for each celebration of Holy Communion. And I'd like to nominate the Christian mother who cooks, cleans, drives around town dropping off children and running errands, and still finds time for serving in her church. And I'd like to nominate the Christian man who puts in 50+ hours per week at his job (not counting the commute), yet still manages to serve faithfully on a church board. There are others who come to mind: Christians who look in on elderly neighbors and provide transportation for them; believers who give of their time and money to care for the poor in their community.

What do you think my second list of great Christians? Have we stretched the definition of greatness? I don't think so. In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus redefines greatness. What he calls greatness has nothing to do with fame or influence or even universal recognition as a theologian or preacher. Instead, Jesus says here, *"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant."* I think it's important to notice that Jesus doesn't tell us to call off the quest for greatness. He just redirects it. Let's examine **Jesus' Recipe**

**for Greatness** this morning. As we look at what Jesus says here we'll note 1] that Jesus tells us to lay aside the Gentile model for greatness, and 2] to become a servant like Jesus.

### **1. Lay aside the Gentile model**

I once heard someone try to account for the prevalence of Jews in professions like doctor, lawyer, and accountant. This person claimed that much of the push for Jewish young men to study for these well-paying professions came from their mothers. He said it this way: When Gentile mothers send their sons off, they say, "Be good!" When Jewish mothers send their sons off, they say, "Be great!" Salome, the mother of the disciples James and John, appears to have been one of those Jewish mothers. She had greatness in mind for her boys and she was going to do what she could to get them there. She came to Jesus one day with her two grown sons in tow and asked a favor of the Lord. Not much, really. Just: *"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom."* That took a little nerve. It was like asking for her sons to be secretary of state and secretary of defense in the coming kingdom of Jesus. Salome imagined that when King Jesus established his dominion, it was going to be like a Jewish version of the spoils system. A whole new administration. A wholesale change in the bureaucracy. And she wanted her boys, James and John, in the top jobs. Now it wasn't as if the other disciples had no political ambitions of their own. When they heard about Salome's outrageous request, Matthew says they were indignant. The fact is, this isn't the first time the disciples had argued about which of them was the greatest. It seems to have been a regular bone of contention among the Twelve.

But what is greatness, really? The disciples seemed to think it had to do with authority, with power, prestige or influence. People today might be inclined to suggest that greatness has to do with a high level of achievement in some field—science or music or literature or athletics--or maybe just the ability to earn a lot of money. But Jesus says here, *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant."* It seems strange to even use the words "great" and "servant" in the same sentence. Servants, by definition, can't be great, can they? Servants are servile. They do the menial stuff. No, greatness and servanthood don't mix, do they?

This attitude becomes so ingrained in us that we adopt the Gentile model more often than we might think. It's almost as if we came into

this world to be served instead of to serve. Husbands and wives open gaping wounds in their marriages with their selfish demands that they be served by their spouses. Children will quite easily expect that their parents exist to serve *them* as chauffeur, short order cook, and flesh-and-blood ATM. Employees and citizens frequently have a keen sense of their rights and entitlements, but are not as sharp about seeing to their responsibilities. Church members sometimes seem more inclined to ask, "What can my church do for me?" than they are to ask, "What can I do for my church?" Pastors speak of *servicing* in the public ministry, but, as the saying says, "There's a little pope in every pastor." All too easily we pastors can begin to view the congregation as our own private fiefdom, where Rule #1 is, "It's my way or the highway." Oh, the Gentile model is alive and well, all right, and residing in the sinful nature of each of us.

Jesus this morning is calling us to repent of our petty pursuit of power. He's calling us to repent of our disinclination to roll up our sleeves and get down on our knees and serve. This, *remember*, is the same Lord who wrapped a towel around himself-to the shame of his disciples-and did the lowly work of foot washing that none of them wanted to do. This is the same Lord, remember, who when the disciples had been feuding about which of them was the greatest, had a little child stand in the midst of them and told them that unless they became like a child, they'd never enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said to them, "*Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.*" The opportunities to serve are right here: in our homes, in our church, in our neighborhood. And we've passed them by, far too often, because we had a Gentile notion of greatness. We were bent on being lords and ladies and lording it over others.

That's why Jesus calls us to turn away from worldly definitions of greatness and follow his example. Through the way that Jesus served us, we have forgiveness for our sins of selfishness and all the rest. And in Jesus we have a model of true greatness through service.

## **2. Become a servant like Jesus**

I find it ironic that Salome's request for positions of privilege for her sons comes right on the heels of Jesus' statement in the opening verses of today's gospel lesson. What Jesus says here is a perfect illustration of something he said to his disciples on the night of he was arrested: "**I am among you as one who serves.**" In a spirit of self-sacrificing service Jesus said, "*We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the*

*Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"* Despite the fact that Jesus is the Son of God incarnate, his whole mission was serving us. As he says, *"The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Jesus served so that we could be lords. Isn't that wonder? He was portrayed in prophecy as a servant, particularly in the prophecies of Isaiah. The LORD introduces Isaiah 53 with its wonderfully clear predictions of Christ's suffering and death with these words: **"See, my servant will act wisely."** (Is 52:13) It was in his capacity as God's Servant to serve us that he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. Our Servant bore in his own body the punishment that brought us peace. He ransomed us, paying with his own life the price that bought our freedom. When he reviews the work of Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul writes in Philippians, **"Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant."** **"He humbled himself,"** the Bible says. It should strike with a sense of wonder and holy awe that the Son of God was willing to serve us like this. And it moves us to gratitude, because we see now that if Jesus had not taken the nature of a servant and suffered death on a cross, we would have been sentenced to eternal servitude in hell.

We are by grace and through faith the disciples of the greatest example of humble, self-sacrificing service that this world has ever seen. Jesus calls us to follow his example and extols it as the path to greatness. He says, If you want to be great, then be a servant. And if you want to be first, then be a slave.

Jesus does give some people positions of authority. He gives authority to parents and pastors and teachers and husbands and fathers and government officials and law enforcement personnel. But where Jesus gives authority, he always expects that those in authority will use their office to serve. In fact, we could be so bold as to say that Jesus never bestows authority except with the expectation that such authority will be used to serve others. Parents are to serve their children, by providing for their physical, spiritual, and emotional welfare. Pastors are to serve their congregations with the Word and sacraments. Husbands are to see their role as head of their families as an assignment to serve their wife and children. Government and law enforcement officials serve in what is truly called public service. Even the disciples would learn this lesson in time. The same men who were once so Gentile-minded in their attitudes about authority, would use

their role as apostles to serve Christ and his Church.

All kinds of people have written recipes for greatness. Get a good education. Make a lot of money. Write an influential book. Get elected or appointed to high office. Jesus' recipe is different. He says, "Be a servant." That's how he measures greatness in his kingdom. And there's no end to the good that can be accomplished when we follow our Lord's example and serve others. *Amen.*