

"Greatness in Suffering and Service" Matthew 20:17-28
Reminiscere Midweek 2023

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Do you ever want to be the greatest? There's something inherent to humans that sometimes we want to be the best or the greatest at something. Jesus has already spoken to His disciples about how they can be great. In Matthew 18:4 He said, "Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Yet, here in today's passage, we find ourselves talking again about what it means for the disciples to be great. They wanted to be important; they wanted to be great! Jesus was about to tell them, again, how they could achieve that aspiration. However, as we immerse ourselves in this discussion about achieving personal greatness, we see Jesus sandwich this discussion with two mentions of His own death. This is both convicting and challenging for us as followers of Jesus. Let's dive into this passage.

Remember that Jesus and His apostles are making their way to Jerusalem. Jesus will eventually be crucified. This is the beginning of the end of Jesus' mission of coming to the earth. That leads us to our first point: The Great One came to suffer. Jesus has already predicted His death a few times, explicitly so two previous times. Now, Jesus directly predicts His death a third time. Jesus gets very specific here. He says that the chief priests and the scribes, that is the religious leaders of the Jewish people, will condemn Him to death. Then, the Jewish leaders will hand Him over to the Gentiles, that is, the Roman authorities, to be punished and killed. Then, Jesus says that He will rise on the third day.

Jesus, the Great One, came to suffer. He knows that it's coming and He is willingly walking directly into the fire. He is trying to prepare His disciples for what will happen. He will be betrayed, He will be

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condemned, He will be punished, and He will be killed. Each time Jesus predicts His death He gives a little bit more information about how it will happen. When you put all this together you can understand the horrific nature of what Jesus is predicting. As most of us know, all that Jesus predicted would happen.

Yet, even in the midst of this horrifying prediction, something quite human is happening in the hearts of the apostles. They still have issues and have another lesson to learn. We need to listen because we have issues and we still have lessons to learn. That takes us to our next point: To be great we must serve. Even in the midst of Jesus predicting His death, the disciples are thinking about themselves and how they might be great. Jesus confronts this issue and redirects them to see how they can really be great! There's so much to unpack from this passage, but let's start with this: James and John, the sons of Zebedee, wanted a place of prominence in the kingdom of Jesus, and apparently, their mother wanted that for them as well. Now, many of us would be embarrassed if our mom asked for something on our behalf. Apparently, the sons of Zebedee didn't mind.

Mrs. Zebedee kneeled before Jesus, to show respect, and asked Him to give her sons a place of honor in His kingdom. She had this idea of Jesus sitting on a throne and one brother sitting on one side of him and the other brother sitting on the other side. I love how we read in Matthew's gospel that Jesus doesn't even answer their mother. Jesus addresses His answer to James and John directly. So, we know that they are there watching all of this go down with anticipation. Jesus doesn't really answer the request. In fact, Jesus responds with a question of His own. He asks them, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" Jesus is pointing out that they don't know the implications of what they are asking.

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Jesus speaks of this cup. The idea here of drinking a cup is the idea of Jesus experiencing something that is terribly difficult. He will be consuming punishment, wrath, and guilt that He does not deserve. Think of when you had to drink terrible tasting medicine as a kid. It was as if your parents were asking you to drink gasoline. It was terrible! The cup you were drinking was nasty medicine. Well, the cup that Jesus will drink is the wrath of God poured out on sin. It's more dark and destructive than anything we could imagine. Jesus will consume all of that punishment. The disciples have no idea the weight of what Jesus is talking about! Yet, James and John say, "We are able."

Jesus is extremely patient and compassionate here. He doesn't correct them and say, "You have no idea what I'm talking about. You're being selfish and foolish!" Instead, Jesus points out that they will drink His cup. What He means is that they will suffer. James would later be put to death and John would be exiled. In fact, all the disciples would eventually suffer in some way. They don't yet know the extent to which Jesus will suffer or that they will suffer. However, Jesus does say that they will go through what He will go through to some extent. Then, Jesus says plainly that it's not up to Him to determine the place of honor for the apostles. That is God's role. God will reward as He sees fit.

This truth that Jesus shares fits right in line with what He just shared from the parable of the vineyard workers in verses 1-16. It is God's right and prerogative to show grace to whomever He wants to show grace and to reward whomever He wants to reward. So, James and John get a small glimpse into the fact that they will face a future like Jesus' future and they get let down gently that it is God's job to reward folks. That's not why Jesus is on the earth at that time. He is

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there to suffer for sinners and drink the cup of God's wrath. However, this is not the end of the story; not by a long shot.

You see, the other disciples found out what was going on with James and John and they did not like that one bit. We read in verse 24, ". . . they became indignant with the two brothers." In other words, they were super angry! The disciples were surely not just angry because the brothers were being selfish. They were angry because they wanted to be prominent. This was not righteous indignation; this was jealous, envious indignation. Jesus knew what was going on throughout all of this and He patiently and calmly sought to teach them a lesson.

Remember, Jesus could have said, "What's wrong with you all? Didn't you just hear me say that I was going to suffer and die? Now, you all are talking about who is going to have the most prominent place in my kingdom!" However, that's not Jesus' method in this moment. Jesus is patient and loving. Jesus makes a point by showing a contrast between how people seek greatness in the world and we should seek greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus speaks of the earthly rulers seeking to show their greatness by acting as tyrants and exercising power over others. They seek more prestige, more power, more influence, more bravado and the like. That's still the case with earthly leaders today, is it not? Jesus said these powerful words to His apostles (and by the power of God's Spirit, to us), "It must not be like that among you."

Listen, fellow redeemed: we are not to be like the world! It must not be like that among us! We are not to seek power, prestige, and influence. So what are we to seek? I'm glad you asked! Jesus says that if we want to be great we must be servants. If we want to be first we must be like a slave. We must lower ourselves and put the needs of others before ourselves. Greatness in God's kingdom comes through

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humility and service! Friends: seek humility, seek service, seek to be like Jesus. To be great we must serve. Well, would Jesus dare ask His followers to do this if He were not willing to do this Himself? Of course not. Remember, He has sandwiched this command for us to serve others between two self-proclamations of His death.

That takes us to our final point: Jesus, the Great One, came not only to suffer, but to serve. Indeed, He would serve in the greatest way by suffering. By explaining His own suffering, Jesus was establishing the standard by which we must serve others. Jesus is teaching the disciples that they, and other followers of His, can become great by serving, just as He served others. Indeed, Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve others. Jesus willingly laid down His life. He didn't have to. He could have wiped out all the bad guys, all the betrayers, all the evil religious leaders, all the Romans, but instead, He took the posture of a servant and displayed the ultimate act of humility by laying down His life. Oh, what humility! Oh, what sacrifice! Oh, what servanthood!

That is our model. That is our goal, to be like Jesus in servanthood. We are made great by serving. We are great by sacrificing. Be like the Great One; be a servant, for His service has redeemed you from the pit.

Amen.