

"GREATNESS ACCORDING TO JESUS"

INTRODUCTION

Today's communion meditation is not part of the sermon series of this Lenten Season. We move in another direction this morning, and shall return to the Lenten sermon series on "The Resources of the Inner Life" next week.

The springboard for today's message is taken from the setting of the Last Supper, from an incident that occurred that night in the upper room as Jesus met with his disciples for their last meal together. The text is from the 13th chapter of John's Gospel:

"And during supper.....Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded Himself with a towel. Then He poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded."

DEVELOPMENT

I know of no other instance in the sacred literature of the world's religions where there is a scene or passage similar to the one I just read to you. Pause for a moment and try to picture that scene in your mind's eye. Jesus - taking a towel and a basin of water and washing the dusty, dirty feet of his disciples. The uniqueness of these lines rests in the fact that here in this one scene you have intermingling elements of divinity and humanity, or royalty and humility. "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God...."

It was taken for granted in the time of our Lord that anybody with authority (and certainly anyone claiming to have divine authority) would lord it over his subordinates and use that authority to promote his own interests. This was the prevailing attitude in those days. If you had rank and status, you did not soil your hands or stoop to manual labor. The clothes you wore were evidence of this - the flowing garments, the loose fitting sandals. Aristotle's ideal man was the gentleman of leisure - the man who did not need to bend his back, flex his muscles other than at the stadium, at the games. Work was a disability, an indignity, disgracing a man and - so it was thought - cutting him off from God. Work was the lot of the slave, the sign of social inferiority.

I recall reading some place that Chinese mandarins allowed their finger nails to grow long and curled in order to demonstrate to everybody that they were artisans. And, if by chance a nail was broken a goldsmith was summoned at once to restore this badge of gentility.

JESUS CHANGED ALL THIS

Jesus came and turned this prevailing social attitude upside down. The Jews expected the Messiah to be a Prince and to arrive trailing clouds of glory; instead He was a carpenter. When He appeared, the Son of God was not a monarch, or statesman, or philosopher, or a military general, but the lowly servant of his fellow man. They couldn't understand it. Judas couldn't comprehend it. It was all so different.

Jesus brought into our world a new idea of greatness, a different perspective on what makes for greatness - it was the greatness of self-forgetful service. ~~And we need to be reminded of this from time to time.~~

You'll remember that all the way up to Jerusalem, His followers had been

bickering among themselves over status and position and rewards. And then in the upper room that night in Jerusalem where they gathered for supper not one of them was willing to perform the humble and hygienic task that had to be performed after that long, hot journey. He did what they refused to do - laid aside his garments, took a towel, tied it round himself, poured water into a basin and began to wash their feet. And perhaps as He did this they began to remember what He had said on the way to Jerusalem....some words about His coming to serve and not to be served.

Recall that scene. A jealous dispute had broken out among His followers. Who among them should rank the highest? And He had silenced their pettiness with the words:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant; and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve."

I'm sure that silenced them ~~and shut them up~~ for a while!

OUR IDEA OF GREATNESS

His idea, his concept of greatness has not won wide acceptance and endorsement across the centuries.

Have you ever stopped to consider the type of person our culture holds up for respect and veneration. It's not the servant-man. I think we tend to think of the successful person as the person who outstrips and outclaws his fellows and becomes wealthy, and powerful and prominent. In America and in the West in general, we tend to think of life as a kind of pyramid with the powerful at the peak, and the ambitious striving and scurrying to achieve a position where there are fewer and fewer equals, and more and more subordinates to whom they can say, "Do this" - and they do it! ~~We're a democratic people, but we are far from having freed ourselves from flunkoyism.~~

We treat with adulation those who have push and pull. Why, some are practically hypnotized by rank and social position and titles and money. The goal of ambition is generally to make a lot of money. "What salary does he make?" "Where does he live?" "What's his position in the firm?" "What clubs does he belong to?" "What model of car does he drive?" These questions that form on our lips are but a reflection of this status seeking urge that's there in all of us. We surround ourselves with things that give us "upward social mobility". To be talked about - to be prominent, recognized, admired, fawned upon - this is taken for greatness and success in our style of life, and how foreign it is to the style of life Jesus proclaimed. "He who would be great among you must be your servant".

I've never forgotten what a young man once told us in one of our prayer groups a number of years ago. He revealed his inner ambition to us, and we admired him for his honesty. He was trying to make a name for himself in show business. He said that he would like to make such a name for himself in show business and become so well know that when he walked the streets of this city with his dark sun glasses on (trying to conceal his identity and maintain his privacy) that people would stop, turn and stare at him as he walked by and perhaps say, "Look...isn't that so and so....there he goes".

These are attitudes that are deeply embedded in our culture and in the West, and wherever the white man has gone he has carried his status symbols along with

him, and they have been copied and emulated. Albert Schweitzer once made this entry in his diary:

"In the middle of September we get the first rains, and the cry is to bring all building timber under cover. As we have in the hospital hardly a man capable of work, I begin, assisted by two loyal helpers, to haul beams and planks about myself. Suddenly I catch sight of a man in a white suit sitting by a patient whom he had come to visit. "Hello, friend" I call out, "Won't you give us a hand?" "I'm an intellectual and don't drag wood about" comes the answer....."You're lucky" I reply. "I, too, wanted to become an intellectual, but I didn't succeed".

Why do we hail as essentially great a man like Schweitzer - Schweitzer who at once fascinated and rebuked the well-fed, comfortable folk of our world. One of the "great" ones of the 20th century. Whether we realize it or not, we are applying the criterion, the yardstick of Jesus to his life.

JESUS AND GREATNESS Jesus, too, thought of life as a pyramid, but He turned our status symbols upside down so that the first are last and the last are first.

According to Him, the nearer the peak....the greater the burden of service and sacrifice. To be near His peak is not to have other people waiting on you; it's the other way around - you put yourself at their service. It was not status that He cared about, but rather self-denying service. In His eyes, the badge of nobility and greatness was not prestige, but usefulness. He never asked about any man: how does he rate? - or what's he worth? What He wanted to know was: does he deny himself? Is he sensitive to human need - to the hurts of others, the bruises of the little people? Over and over again His counsel to people ran along these lines: don't let your life revolve around your interest and ambitions. Get out of your own light. Escape from the prison of the self. Find yourself in a cause greater than yourself.

No one has achieved true greatness and real stature in life who has not felt in some way that his life was not his own to do with as he pleased, but belonged rather to God, to his fellow-man, and that what God had given him in native ability and talent was given to be shared with others.

We need to follow his lead more than we do in our churches at this point. The only distinction conferred by Jesus on His followers was that of humble service. And yet our churches continue to have their hierarchies, their orders, their status symbols, their power plays, their positions of influence. Churches, too, adore success....itch to be prominent....to have the biggest building...biggest budget...largest membership. People want to be identified with the prestige churches and prestige pulpits and some lives need that boost. But the real Christians don't worry about such props. How do you measure up? I'm reminded of some words of an older colleague passed on to me when I was starting out in the ministry. "You'll discover you can get a lot of kingdom building done....if you don't have to constantly worry about who's going to receive the credit". Good advice.

Greatness according to Jesus is tied in with service. Self-denying service. Aware that He had come from God and was going back to God, He rose from the table,

laid aside his garments, took a towel, tied it around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash the feet of his disciples...then to wipe them with a towel. When it was over, He said to them, giving to Christians in every age their first order of business, "I have set you an example. You are to do as I have done for you".

"The Kingdoms of the earth go by
In purple and in gold;
They rise....they flourish and they die,
And all their tale is told.

Our Kingdom only is Divine,
One banner triumphs still,
Its King a servant - and it sign -
a gibbet on a hill".

PRAYER O God, as we stand and look at the figure of Jesus, trying to enter into close association with him, and as we watch the wave of His popularity gradually receding until there is not one soul left, help us in our lives to stand loyal to Him who ^{to be} we know the Truth and the Way and the Life.

Help us when we see Him to follow Him, and then to show Him to the world we live in. All these things we ask in his name. Amen