

The Fourth Sunday In Lent (March 22, 2020)

Text: Matthew 20:17-28

Theme: Jesus Came To Serve.

- I. He gave his life as a ransom.
- II. He corrected a foolish request.
- III. He teaches us to serve.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Matthew 20:17-28

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer!

Dear friends, for whom our Savior gave his life as a ransom;

On working crews and in factories it is said that there are basically two types of foremen. There is the foreman who thinks that since he is the foreman, he doesn't have to do any of the work. He simply tells those under him what to do, and stands by with a cup of coffee in his hand, watching them do all the work. And then there's the foreman who sees it as his duty to help his workers get their job done. He's the hardest worker of them all. Instead of simply telling them what to do, he shows them what to do. He's commonly seen running a machine himself, or with tools in his hands. He's maybe a bit difficult to find, because he's busy chasing after things, and making sure his workers have everything they need.

When I was in college, during the summer I worked at an iron foundry in Menomonie, Wisconsin, called Badger Iron Works. There were two foremen in the plant, one of each type. The one you could always find standing around talking to someone. At the end of the day when it was time to wash up to go home, he was always the first one done, because he never got dirty. One day the owner of the plant and his grade-school-aged son were walking around the plant and one of the workers overheard the boy say to his dad, "When I grow up, I would like to have that man's job," pointing at this foreman. "Why is that?" his father asked. The boy replied, "Because he doesn't do anything."

The other foreman was different. He got dirty like the rest of us. If someone was missing, he'd fill in for them. If someone was behind, he'd help them catch up. If something went wrong, he was the first one there to try to correct the situation. Whether we're the boss, or the worker, I think we'd agree that the second kind of foreman is preferable.

Today Jesus tells us how to be great in God's kingdom, how to be a foreman, so to speak. We become great in God's kingdom, not by lazily standing by and letting others do the work and serve us, not by proudly thinking that we're better than some others and above certain tasks. We become great by being lowly, and humbly serving others. Jesus himself is no mere foreman. He's the very Son of God. But what did he do? He came to earth not to be served, but to serve. He gave his very life as a ransom. We also hear how he corrected a foolish request for positions of glory in his kingdom. In these verses, Jesus also teaches us to serve.

Jesus was not afraid to get his hands dirty; from the time he left the glories of heaven to be born here on earth, and laid in a dirty feeding trough in Bethlehem for his first bed; to the forty days alone in the wilderness, being tempted by the devil; to the time he made mud and put it on a man's blind eyes to heal him; to the time in the upper room when he became a slave to his disciples, taking a basin of water and washing their feet; to the time his own hands and feet were nailed to a cross. Jesus lived and died to personally serve, to serve you and me.

In our verses we find Jesus going to Jerusalem for the last time, to perform the ultimate service, to give his life as a ransom for us. He took his twelve disciples aside and explained to them: "We are going to Jerusalem, and I am going to be handed over to the leaders of the people. They will condemn me to death and turn me over to the Gentiles to be mocked and whipped and crucified. But on the third day I will be raised to life." Especially now in the season of Lent, we are reminded of the terrible suffering and death that Jesus underwent for our sins. It is one thing to do a small favor for someone, or to help them with some task. But Jesus willingly served us by giving his very life! Giving his life as the ransom price!

When a child is kidnapped, quite often the parents will receive a ransom note requiring that they pay some large sum of money for the release of their child. But not all the money in the world could begin to purchase our release from sin, death and the devil. The only ransom that could suffice was the holy precious blood, and the innocent suffering and death of God's One and Only Son. Jesus was willing to serve and give his life as that ransom. God's own Son did not consider himself too great to become the lowliest slave of all, and perform the lowliest task of all by dying in the stead of sinners.

Jesus had hardly finished telling his disciples what he would go through, when a mother and her two sons came to him with a request, a bold request, that Jesus give her two sons the two greatest positions in his kingdom. But Jesus had to correct them, because it was a foolish request. "Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. 'What is it you want?' he asked. She said, 'Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.'"

Zebedee's sons were James and John, two of Jesus' twelve disciples. In fact, they, along with Peter, were Jesus' closest three disciples, who were permitted to accompany Jesus at times when the others were not, such as on the Mount of Transfiguration, and when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead. From a purely human standpoint, James and John would have seemed to be likely candidates for the number one and number two positions in Jesus' kingdom. However, we notice that Peter was left out of the request, and the fact that James and John were in that inner core of disciples was simply an undeserved privilege granted to them by Jesus, and made them no better than anyone else.

From elsewhere in the Bible we know that James and John's mother's name was Salome, and we also know that Jesus' mother Mary had a sister named Salome. If this was the same Salome, then she was Jesus' aunt, and James and John were his cousins. Is that why Salome, James and John were bold enough to make this request, because they were related to Jesus? In the world, often positions of authority and glory are given to people because of their family relationships. But that's not the way it works in God's kingdom. It doesn't matter who a person is, because every person is sinful and totally

unworthy of any position in God's kingdom. It is only because of God's undeserved love for us in Christ that he has given us a place in his kingdom.

So this request was a foolish one. Evidently James, John and their mother did not understand Christ's kingdom. Likely they had the mistaken impression that it would be an earthly kingdom of political power and glory like the kingdom of David. They didn't realize that it was a spiritual kingdom, a kingdom based on the forgiveness that Jesus would win by a bitter suffering and death on a cross, a kingdom based on serving, not on being served. But James and John were looking for greatness apart from serving.

Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" To "drink the cup" was a figure of speech, usually referring to a cup of joy, or a cup of grief. Remember in Psalm 23 it says, "My cup runneth over," referring to the cup of joy that is ours as Christians. But obviously here Jesus is referring to a cup of grief, the same cup that he later referred to in his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me," the cup of his bitter suffering and death. Jesus had just explained to his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem to be nailed to a cross. He explained it in words simple enough for a child to understand, but still his disciples did not understand what was going to happen and why. Surely if Jesus was going to be crucified, then the next two people in line in his kingdom could expect to experience the same. "Can you drink that cup?" Jesus asks James and John.

"We can," they answered, not understanding what was involved in the death of the Savior, that he was the ransom for sinners. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." James and John thought they were willing to die with Jesus. However when the time came, they both fled with the rest of the disciples. But they did later learn that greatness in Jesus' kingdom is a matter of serving. They did later drink of the cup of Jesus' grief. James was the first of the disciples to die. He did so as a martyr at the hands of wicked King Herod. John lived the longest of the disciples and died of natural causes, but he suffered imprisonment, being beaten, and exile.

When the other disciples found out about the request of James and John, we are told that they became indignant, indignant because each one thought that he should have the position of honor and glory. Aren't we too often like those disciples? We tend to be so sensitive about the honor and glory that we think we should receive, when we should be concerned, not about honor and glory, but about serving.

Before the disciples began fighting about who was the greatest, Jesus called them together and told them, "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 become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave--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." In Jesus' kingdom, everything is upside-down and inside-out from the ways of the world. In Jesus' kingdom, greatness comes, not by being served by many, but by serving many; not by exercising authority, by demonstrations of power and glory, but by becoming lowly as a slave and serving others.

In the world, everyone is demanding their rights. That's all we hear -- rights for minorities, rights for children, rights for women, rights for workers, rights for employers.

And we should be concerned about people's rights, not so much our own rights, but the rights of others. We should also understand that the ways of the world are based upon selfishness, upon being served. In God's kingdom, greatness does not come by demanding rights and privileges. It comes by humbly serving others in love. The Apostle Paul says in Philippians: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus; 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, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross!" [2:3-8]

Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. It is only because of Jesus' most lowly service on the cross that we are even members of his kingdom at all. By ourselves we are nothing but lost sinners. When we realize that we don't deserve to be in his kingdom, that we are what we are only because of God's grace, then we rejoice in the forgiveness he has won for us, and we gladly take the lowliest place, the last place, and humbly serve all others as greater than ourselves. We find that the lowest place is the one that is nearest to our humble Savior, who has served and saved us.

Amen.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father--to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.