

People of the Passion
Maundy Thursday
The Apostles, the Servant Leaders

Texts: Luke 22:19-24; John 13:2-5,14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Now I don't want you to raise your hands, but just think about this question: "How many of you feel you have achieved greatness?" If I did ask you to raise your hands, I'm guessing there wouldn't be many. Granted, the question is vague since everyone might describe greatness differently. But however you define it, few people feel they've attained it. If, however, I asked, "How many of you would like to achieve greatness?" (Again... greatness as you define it for yourself.) Now I bet I'd get a bunch of hands... maybe even everyone's hand. Who has the goal in life of being average? Who strives to be mediocre? Whatever is your gift or your passion, don't you want to be great?

Let's talk about this a bit more today. Is striving for greatness a sin? How is "greatness" be defined?

We'll talk about this by looking at the 12 apostles on the night Jesus was betrayed. The disciples were quite a group! Several were unschooled fishermen. One was a contemptible tax collector. One was a patriot. One had a Greek name so may not have been Jewish. One was from an obscure village in Galilee. Unless you memorized a catch song about the 12 disciples in Sunday School at some point in your life, I would guess most of us would struggle to come up with a list of all 12 names.

But here's what we can take note of: in many ways, these men were a lot like you and me. It was Thursday evening... the one we are commemorating tonight. Jesus was celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples. Let's listen to the report of what happened that evening:

John 13:2-5 The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him....

This act of washing feet was common. The roads were dirty. The climate hot. The sandals were open. Even a short walk, and your feet would be very dirty. So the custom of the day dictated that when a guest came to your house, one of your servants would wash the feet of your guests. And if you were poor, then you would do this menial task yourself to honor your guests.

Well, Jesus and his disciples borrowed an upper room. They really weren't a guest in anyone's house. There was no servant and no host to wash feet. None of them was willing to stoop to that level for the others. So their feet were left unwashed.

But not for long. Jesus... their master... their teacher... humbled himself to wash their feet. One by one, he washed their feet in a water basin and dried their feet with a towel he had wrapped around his waist.

Jesus was teaching them, and us, something important. First, he was teaching something about himself. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. And they were about to see to just what extent he was willing to serve. His desire to serve his disciples... and you and me... led him to give his life as a ransom for many. He served us even to point of allowing nails to pierce his hands and his feet on our behalf.. in our place... for *us*.

Then Jesus taught them the second truth to be learned from this foot washing:

v.14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

They were to serve others... and no task would be too menial.

These men who would serve as leaders Christ's church on earth... who would be *great* in Christ's church on earth... who became so great that we know them today, 2,000 years later... these great men needed to hear the hard lesson, that greatness in Christ's Kingdom comes through serving others. Humble, lowly service to others is the mark of greatness!

Did they learn the lesson? How could they not? This wasn't a hard-to-grasp parable. The lesson here was vivid, simple and memorable. And it was portable too... every easy to take with them. As Jesus served them by washing their feet, so they ought to serve one another.

And that's why it's especially shocking when we find out that later that very evening, that **“a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.”** Can you imagine your frustration if you had been in Jesus' shoes? I think I would have walked up to a wall and started pounding my head on it. “Really? You forgot already? I *just* got done telling you that you are great when you humbly serve each other. I can't believe this!”

Before we shake our heads at those self-centered disciples... let take an honest look at our own hearts and lives. Have you ever thought of greatness as being greater than others? Have you sometimes forgotten that our God defines greatness as humble service to others?

And this is especially telling... have you ever met a fellow Christian and started telling them about all you do at church? “I was president of the congregation.” “I taught Sunday school for 15 years!” “I served meals for all the funerals!” “I think I must've served on every board and committee ever formed.” Have you ever done that? Have you ever boasted even about service in the church... jockeying for “greatness” just as Jesus disciples did time and again?

Couldn't Jesus start pounding his head against a wall because we just don't get it either? It's *not* about power, authority, fame, prestige, position... **it's about serving**... serving God and serving one another.

So what did Jesus do to these self-centered disciples, so slow to understand. So weak in their faith?

Luke 22:19-24 And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays

him.” They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.

For these disciples, and for you and me, Jesus stayed the course... the path that would take him from upper room, to garden, to chains, to high priest’s palace, to Pilate’s palace, to the whipping post, to cross, to the grave. He gave his body as a sacrificial offering for all of your sins. He shed his blood as the full payment for all sins.

And that’s not all. Jesus gave his disciples, and all of his disciples of all time, a meal that would forgive, and strengthen. Giving bread, he said, **“This is my body”**. He gave them wine. **“This is my blood,”** he added. And he became explicit: **“This is the body that I give for you,”** he explained. **“This is the blood that I shed for you. This I do so you be sure you have the forgiveness of sins.”**

Jesus gave them and he gives us in the Holy Supper what played out on the cross the next day. We cannot explain it (real bread, real body; real wine, real blood—given for us and to us—for forgiveness!). We just take his word for it. We rejoice in it. We come to receive it for our sure comfort. We come humbled by it and made more ready by it to serve.

What about the eleven disciples? Did they ever catch on? They did, didn’t they. They stopped arguing about who was greatest, and they each became great. Great, as they served others, selflessly sharing the Good News of Jesus with the whole ancient world. By some accounts, just in that first half century or so after Christ, the disciples carried the gospel message to the far reaches of their world: to Great Britain, to India, to Iran, to Greece, to Russia, to North Africa—to name a few places.

They took huge risks in service. They didn’t think about self, but others. All but one of these men, we have reason to believe, gave their lives for the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are counted among the martyrs of Christendom. The last one was not executed, but he was exiled. And God used him, John, to write a gospel, a series of letters, and the book of Revelation in the Scriptures.

It is safe to say that those men became the servant leaders that Jesus intended them to be.

Now Jesus turns to us. As he gives us again this evening his body and blood for our forgiveness, will we do less than offer our bodies in return as living sacrifices to his cause? Jesus comforts us; let us bring his eternal comfort to others. Jesus died for all the world; let us do our part in telling the world what that means. Jesus came and served us by washing us clean from all sin. Let’s go out and achieve greatness! Not in the eyes of man, but in the eyes of God, through humble, consistent, self-sacrificing service in love and obedience to Christ, by serving one another in love. Go and serve! And be great. Amen.