

Who Is the Greater?

Isaiah 43:16-21, Luke 22:1-38 (ESV)

December 11, 2005

“A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.” Can you believe it? The first twelve disciples, hand-picked by Jesus himself, sent out as his apostles, had not even left the table from the Last Supper before they were arguing among themselves about which one of them was the greatest. Jesus said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In a fit of instant amnesia, “A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.” Jesus said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” In apparent, utter disinterest, “A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.” Jesus warned, “Behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table.” As if that did not matter to them, “A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.”

Apart from what we know only too well about the depth and tenacity of sin, this would be incomprehensible. It is a wonder the early church ever survived the first disciples. Not that reason for disappointment about leaders has been unusual in the history of the church. I believe it was Balmer Kelly, who used to worship here and who was a professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary, who used to say that the church’s survival of two-thousand years of ministers was proof enough that it is an institution. of divine origin. And we could easily imagine an argument about supposed greatness taking place at a presbytery meeting or maybe even at a session meeting, though surely it would never happen at a board of deacons. But it is disconcerting to see such a dispute arise among the very first ministers at the beginning of the church and in the presence of Jesus Christ himself. It is absolutely astounding.

Jesus took this dispute very seriously. He not only offered a corrective teaching about the nature and practice of greatness especially within the Christian church but also, and even more so, he proclaimed the gospel about himself, the gospel which we realize today is the message of Christmas. “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am

among you as the one who serves.” “Who is the greater?” “I am among you as the one who serves.” “Who is the greater?” “I am among you as the one who serves.”

The world in which we live measures greatness in terms of power. Thus it has always been. “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.” Just because they are called benefactors does not mean that they are benefactors. And just because they lord it over others does not mean that they are lords. But the ones who have power over others are regarded as great, so that the ones who do not have power lust after it. People want power to go where they want to go when they want to go, to buy what they want to buy when they want to buy it, and especially to have other people wait on them and serve them and do what they want them to do all the time. That is power, and that is the measure of greatness in the world in which we live. Thus it was with the Romans, and thus it is with the Americans.

By way of contrast, the Lord of the world in which we live measures greatness in terms of service. “For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” “Who is the greater?” Jesus understands that in the eyes of the world the one receiving the service of others is greater than the one providing the service. He understands that very well. But he rejects it. He rejects it out of hand. He rejects it, and he forges a new and opposite course in the world. “I am among you as the one who serves.” I am among you as one who rejects the world’s measure of greatness by power. I am among you as one who refuses to lord it over others. I am among you as one who refuses to seek false titles. I am among you as one who serves, as one who is lowly, as one who is humble, as one who lays down his life for you. Thus the Lord of the world in which we live rejects the world’s measure of greatness in terms of power and replaces it with its opposite, measuring greatness in terms of service. He is truly great precisely because he serves.

There are at least three particular ways in relation to today’s reading in which Jesus especially serves us. Those are communion, the cross, and Christmas. Of course, we could add more about his parables and healings. But for now, let us look at these three. The first and most obvious in today’s reading has to do with his self-offering in the Last Supper which became the basis for our celebration of the Lord’s Supper, otherwise known as communion. “He took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’” Jesus redefined the ancient Passover meal—which had been a remembrance of the long ago deliverance in the Exodus from Egypt—Jesus redefined the Passover as a remembrance of himself and of his offering of himself for you and for me, and thus

as an occasion for hope for the even greater deliverance in Christ. It is not only that he hosted the meal or even that he served the meal to his disciples. It is even more that he became the meal, identifying his body as bread for our nourishment and his blood as drink for our sustenance. As John Calvin wrote of this passage, Christ is our food and drink, that is to say, he alone is sufficient for all that belongs to our salvation. That is service beyond mere serving. That is self-giving far beyond charity. That is gospel self-offering such as the world had never known. "I am among you as the one who serves."

The service which Jesus extends to us in communion points ahead, of course, to the greater service he extends to us on the cross. What he talked about with the bread and the wine, the offering of his own body and blood, he made real in his willing self-sacrifice on the cross. The new covenant that he named at the dinner table he sealed with his blood on the cross. On the one hand he is our great high priest, presiding over the offering of the final sacrifice at the high altar of the cross. On the other hand, and at the same time, he is himself the content of the offering, he is himself the sacrificial lamb that is given up at the altar of the cross. As both priest and lamb, he gave his own body and blood, giving to conquer sin and evil, dying in order that we might live. "I am among you as the one who serves."

The service of communion and the service of the cross are both based on an earlier service which forms the basis of them both, an earlier self-humbling which sets the pattern for them both, an earlier self-giving which we especially remember and acknowledge today at Christmas. Without that, he could not performed the others. Consider the message of Christmas as enshrined in the Nicene Creed: "The only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made... for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man." As Jesus said, "I am among you as the one who serves." This is gospel. This is good news. This is the redefinition of the nature and practice of greatness away from the possession and exercise of power. This is the redefinition of the nature and practice of greatness in terms of the life and death of a servant. This is the establishment of a new covenant. This is our salvation. Thanks be to God!

It is on the basis of Christ's service at the first Christmas and so still now, at communion then and every time we receive it, and on the cross once and for all, that Jesus Christ also commands us to live lives of Christian service. Having redefined the nature of greatness, he redefines the practice of greatness, especially within the Christian church, especially for us yet today. "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not

so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.” “Not so with you.” Do not be deceived. Do not be drawn into the false ways of the world, defining greatness in terms of power. Instead, follow me, defining greatness in terms of service. “Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.” Let the very greatest in the Christian church be as a youth or a little child, expecting no special privilege or prominence. Let your leader be a servant. There is no higher greatness in the church.

In that Jesus Christ came to be a servant, how much more are all of us who would follow him to be servants. We gather here to worship God, and then we go forth to serve, at home, at school, at work, at play, serving as we have been served, giving because God has given to us. This is the basis of all evangelism, of all mission, of all stewardship, and of all benevolence. The life of discipleship is not an easy trip to heaven. To follow Jesus Christ is to swim against the stream of the world in which we live. Let us prepare ourselves for faithfulness. When young parents stand before us today to reaffirm their faith, taking their stand with Jesus Christ, the suffering servant, they do so with eyes wide open, knowing that the world about us has little respect for such commitment. We give thanks for their witness to the faith. When we baptize their infant daughter in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, knowing that the baptism is an eternal sign that the child belongs not to the world and not to the enemies of God, but instead to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, there is a part of us that holds our breath, knowing that the Christian life will not be easy for that little girl, anymore than it is for any of us. But at the same time, we also rejoice at the overflowing goodness of God who names us as his very own children. Thanks be to God!

Despite the undeniably disconcerting aspect of the disciples’ dinner table argument—“A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest”—nevertheless it is good for us that the disciples were so out of touch with what Jesus had done at the first Christmas, what Jesus was doing at the Last Supper, and what Jesus was about to do on the cross. For that gave Jesus Christ the opportunity to ask, to answer, and to redefine the answer to, the question about the nature and practice of greatness. “For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

Who Is the Greater?

5

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org