

“Making Christianity Great Again”

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Wittenberg Lutheran Center

Any of you ever dreamed of being great? You ever strive for a championship, or had a goal of being the best in your field? Being “great” probably means different things for different people. When our President talks about “making America great again”, some have wondered, “Haven’t we always been great?” Others have suggested that America has never been all that great. The famous educator Horace Mann once said, “If any man seeks for greatness, let him forget greatness and ask instead for truth, and he will find both.” Good advice. With this thought in mind, I’d like to pursue the truth of God’s Word for us today, especially the teaching of Christ about greatness and service... desiring to be first, but placing ourselves last. I’ll be using some familiar terms for service – terms that we’re probably more familiar with here in the Church – words like sacrifice and stewardship.

The gospel proclamation in today’s text may seem pretty obvious to us. Jesus reveals His Father’s “game plan” for our salvation... referring to Himself as the “Son of Man” – a title from the Old Testament that points to the messiah. Jesus the Messiah is to be betrayed, killed, and then raised from the dead. And sad as it sounds at first, for us who are familiar with the truth, this is great news – the Gospel! We have the privilege to skip ahead in St. Mark’s account for the completed passion and resurrection of our Lord. We have the testimony of eyewitnesses. We know the promises have come true. The grace of God and the glory of God are revealed in His Son for us to believe. Now what comes next in Jesus’ teaching for today is the response to that belief. We see how God now gives us the will to serve others and empowers us for action through His presence in His sacramental gifts. According to Jesus, this response involves serving others and receiving those who are “not-so-great” in the world’s eyes.

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Jesus is constantly turning things upside-down, so that we – and the disciples – will never be too secure or smug in our own thinking, but constantly relying on Him and His Word. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Proverbs [3:5] says “*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.*” Sometimes that’s easier said than done. We’re constantly striving for greater understanding, constantly fighting our own selfish ambition, seeking a form of “greatness” of our own, whether we want to admit it or not. To illustrate this truth, Jesus embraces a child in the midst of His chosen twelve, His closest disciples, to show how much He loves us all, regardless of our status or our station in life. The disciples at this point already possess a gift that is reserved for “great” men, because they have been individually called and gathered by Christ. Jesus taught them personally and intimately. They could behold His face, hear His voice, and feel His touch.

Christ reveals that we are all equally loved and therefore equally “great” in God’s eyes. Jesus teaches us that our response to this great love is to live a life of service: of sacrifice and stewardship, not a life of comparisons and status. Sacrifice and stewardship throughout the Bible are always supposed to be in response for something God has already done for us. This isn’t easy, and it isn’t supposed to be easy, but that doesn’t necessarily make it a burden. As the disciples would soon find out, God anticipated their need and ours, giving us the gift of the sacraments – Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution – to strengthen and enable Christians to do the work at hand. Then, because this work is done in response to God’s grace, it is done with joy. I believe that in order to make anything “great” again – in God’s eyes, we would have to repent and return to embrace this perspective ourselves.

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As Mark records for us, during this trip through Galilee, the disciples’ “training” has not been going very well. Not only did they fail to understand Jesus’ forecast of His death and resurrection, they were afraid to even ask for clarification. The last time Jesus foretold of these things, Peter had to be rebuked by Jesus for disagreeing with God’s “game plan”. Redemption by way of Jesus’ crucifixion sounded crazy. Now as they move even closer to the climax awaiting them in Jerusalem, Jesus reveals for the second time what was unfolding, and the disciples are understandably more reserved. When they walked alone, however, on the way to Capernaum, they must have had a lively discussion among themselves. We could speculate all day about the exact debate and how it unfolded.

Did the thought of Jesus’ passion and resurrection trigger it? They were afraid to broach this subject in front of Jesus... perhaps they were now trying to sort this out on their own. Jesus had raised others from the dead, but if He died, how would He be raised? Maybe they were leaning on their own understanding. Maybe “the three” (Peter, John, and James) and “the other nine” saw themselves as two polarized sub-groups. Only “the three” had witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration. Maybe they considered themselves “greater”. Maybe the failure of “the nine” to cast out the boy’s demon (last week’s gospel lesson) brought on some arguing. Maybe Jesus’ prediction of His death prompted some speculation of who’s “second-in-command”. If we take an honest look at human nature, we must confess that all of these scenarios are plausible, but we just don’t know. We do know that this was not the only time the disciples would discuss their relative “greatness”

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Mark tells us [10:35ff] that James and John wanted to sit on Jesus’ right and left in glory. Even as late as Maundy Thursday in the upper room [Luke 22:24ff], the disciples debated about which of them was the greatest. But if they had been listening, Jesus had already given a pretty good definition of what amounts to “greatness”: Jesus commended the Centurion with the paralyzed servant [Mt. 8:10], who trusted that Jesus’ Word alone was sufficient to heal – When Jesus heard that this esteemed commander had humbled himself and marched out to meet Jesus, *“He was astonished and said to those following Him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such **great faith**.”* John the Baptist, who suffered in Herod’s dungeon, impressed Jesus, too [Mt. 11:11] – *“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen **anyone greater than John the Baptist**; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is **greater than he**.”*

We could also cite the Canaanite woman with the demon-possessed daughter, who had begged and groveled at Jesus’ feet [Mt. 15:28], *“...O woman, **great is your faith!** Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.* Notice that in all these cases, great faith is made active in humility, self-sacrifice and service for others. But in our world, “greatness” is usually measured in ways that turn people against each other. Trying to establish who’s the greatest among us is something we are pretty familiar with. We love making comparisons and contrasts. We debate over the American Idol. Every election year we herald the winners, our great men and women who will govern us. But we’re driven apart by human standards of “greatness”. We don’t always agree on who qualifies. We’re fickle with our heroes. And no sooner do we set these “great ones” up, than we knock them down. Maybe this is our own way of feeling powerful, or “great” ourselves.

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Is this the life God has prepared for us? Does this reflect our Biblical perspective of service? God in Christ Jesus has given us the best gift of all – salvation and life with Him forever. There is a rhythm between this gift of forgiveness/eternal life and the response of the believer. One Lutheran theologian describes this rhythm as a “double movement”. Whenever God gives us His grace through the sacraments of Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper, He does so divinely anticipating a response from us in the form of some kind of sacrifice or action. And when we focus on the “greatness” of God in Christ Jesus, it brings us closer together. When we call our attention to the visible gifts He has given us, we see that there is one baptism – for the great and the not-so-great alike. There is one loaf, of which all of us are mixed together. There are no more individual grains of wheat. There are no individual grapes anymore in the wine we drink – all have become one.

And Christ is there with us by His own promise. We are all made one with Him AND with one another. Empowered by that sure promise, our faith is made active and the kingdom of God is made great in service. We can be God’s stewards of that promise... Got any ideas? Maybe we could elevate somebody whose spirit needs a lift. We could let the forgiveness we’ve been given shine out through us to someone who has hurt us. We can never be the least... We can never really be the greatest, for that matter, either. Those extremes belong to the One Who humbled Himself perfectly, Who was the perfect sacrifice for our sins. “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*” [John 15:13]

Because of His sacrifice, Jesus is the least; Jesus is the greatest! To Him be all glory and honor forever and ever. Amen.

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May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.