

Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness. Amen.

Our sermon text is the gospel for today, we hear again verses 25-28, **“Jesus called them together and said, “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.”** This is God’s Word.

Fellow subjects in God’s kingdom,

Once there was a man who served as the president of a large corporation. He was a powerful man – when he said “jump” people would ask, “How high?” Everyone was below him, and everyone had to answer to him. And this job came with nice benefits – a fancy house, nice car. But this man was different. He decided to take an upside-down approach to life. He decided that he didn’t want to be president anymore. Instead of climbing up the corporate ladder, he decided to climb down the corporate ladder. So, to everyone’s surprise, he applied for a lower position – the position of vice president. He got it, of course. He demoted himself, and made someone else president. Now he had someone above him.

But he wasn’t done yet. He had an upside-down approach to life. He demoted himself again, this time to office executive. Now he had 15 people over him, and less pay. He wanted to go even lower, so he demoted himself again. Now he was an administrative assistant, and he had 200 people over him. His pay was going down, so he had to sell his house and move into a smaller one. But he wasn’t done yet. He was an upside-down thinker. He finally demoted himself to the lowest position in the company – he was in the mail room, and everyone in the company was over him.

Would this ever happen in real life? Probably not. No one strives to be at the bottom, serving everybody else. Greatness is climbing to the top. Greatness is how many people you have underneath you. Greatness is power.

But God has an upside-down approach to life. God has set up his kingdom, a spiritual kingdom, in an upside-down sort of way. God loves to contradict how our world thinks. In God’s upside-down kingdom, the greatest person is not the person who is at the top, who is in charge of everyone else and can tell everyone else what to do. In God’s kingdom, the greatest person is one who is at the bottom. It’s the one who has the most people over him, and he answers and serves everyone. In God’s kingdom, that’s greatness.

Doesn’t that seem strange? It must have seemed strange to two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John. They had a completely different picture of “greatness.” They believed, just like everybody else, that Jesus had come into the world to help the Jews overthrow the Roman government. Someday, Jesus would reestablish the glorious kingdom of Israel, and he would be in charge, and we, the twelve apostles, would be at his side. We’re going to be the twelve vice presidents. We’re going to be in charge of everybody. James and John were part of Jesus’ inner circle, and they couldn’t wait to be number one and number two in Jesus’ future kingdom.

Their mother even got involved. All mothers want to see their children succeed, so she took Jesus aside and asked him for a special favor for her sons. **“What is it you want?” Jesus asked their mother. And 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.”** In other words, make my sons number one and number two, when you finally take charge – that was her request.

And Jesus said to her, **“You don’t know what you are asking.”** You don’t know what my kingdom is. It’s not an earthly kingdom. The twelve apostles aren’t going to be the twelve vice presidents someday. You’re thinking about greatness in a worldly way. God’s way is harder, more difficult, not glorious at all. That’s why Jesus asked James and John, **“Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”** The cup Jesus was talking about was that cup of humility, that cup of suffering and lowliness that he was going to experience in the not-so-distant future.

James and John didn’t understand that, and that’s why they said, **“We can.”** We can take it. Isn’t it amazing how gentle and patient Jesus was with his disciples? Instead of taking them to task, Jesus gently lets them down by saying, **“You will indeed drink from my cup.”** You will indeed experience humility and lowliness and giving service to others, **“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.” In my spiritual kingdom, I will have people sitting at my right and my left, that is true. But those people are going to be the ones who achieved greatness in a very upside-down sort of way. My Heavenly Father is the one who places people into those positions.

Now when the other ten disciples heard about this, they were upset. They thought James and John were trying to get the inside track on positions number one and two. So, Jesus called them together and explained to them that the kingdom that they were going to be a part of had nothing to do with earthly greatness. God’s kingdom is an upside-down one: **“The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high authorities exercise authority over them. Not so with you.”** The world is all about bossing people around, but that’s not how it’s going to be with you, Jesus said. **“Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first, must be your slave.”** That’s upside-down! A slave was someone who would wash other people’s feet, get their food and drink, clean up when people were done eating. Slavery and servitude – that’s greatness, Jesus said.

And then Jesus describes himself as the number one slave in the world: **“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.”** Jesus didn’t come down to earth to tell people what to do. He came to serve, to place himself underneath everybody. And he did that when he gave his life as a ransom for many.

Do you like God’s upside-down approach to greatness? Are you someone who wants to place yourself underneath other people? Do you want to serve other people? “What is it that you need? Let me get that for you.” Is that you? We might have our moments when we do that sort of thing, but what is our natural tendency? What do we prefer? Don’t we prefer to be the one that is being served, telling everyone else what to do? “Bring that food to me. Wait, take it back, I don’t like it. Someone else should clean up after me.” Isn’t this how we are at home? Maybe even a little bit at church? We really prefer to have someone else do things for us – I want someone to serve me. I have come to be served. I want people to be friendly to me, to be nice to me, and give things to me. Don’t we naturally shy away from being the one who puts himself or herself beneath everybody else? I’m above that! I’m not going to do that!

That’s our pride talking, isn’t it? Our good old sinful nature, our sin. But isn’t it comforting to know that you have a God who says to you, “I see that you are sinful, and even though I’m God and I’m way above you, I’m going to stoop down and serve you. I’m not the kind of God that sits up in heaven, and barks out orders to the angels – do this, do that.”

Our God is an upside-down God. His way of being a great God is by placing himself below you, serving you, taking your sins away for you. “I’m going to be your servant,” God says, “Your slave, and win your soul.” That’s what Jesus told his disciples he was going to do: **“The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.”** That’s greatness in the eyes of God, suffering for you as your Savior and dying for you. He did this so that you could come to him and be comforted in knowing that there is no condemnation for you who are in Christ Jesus. And if you have any doubt, then Jesus adds that last promise to his disciples, that after three days he would rise from the dead. That’s your proof that this God who became your servant really did take away your sin. Because of his lowliness, there really is no condemnation for you.

That’s why we worship him. We sing “great is the Lord” not because he is so great, in a general, “big-God”-sort-of way. We worship him because he was willing to lower himself, not just to our level, but below our level, to serve us as our Savior.

And today, Jesus invites us to pursue greatness his way. If you want to be great, Jesus says, then be someone’s servant. Put yourself below someone else. During this pandemic don’t think only of yourself, think about others. Help your elderly neighbor by going to the store for them to buy supplies so they don’t have to expose themselves to the virus. Even though you can’t meet with your fellow members right now, pick up the phone and call them, see how they are holding up. Give them encouragement and build them up with the Word of God. Don’t wait for other people to do that for you. Put yourself below others. Be like Christ that way. It might not look very “great” in the eyes of the world, but, quite frankly, who cares what the world thinks. Be a servant, a humble, lowly, kind, and gentle servant to others, just as Christ has been to you. Then you will be great in the eyes of our great God. Amen.