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“Gospel Greatness”

Text: Luke 22:24-30 (2 Cor 4:7-10; Prov 3:1-8)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Greatness is the world's system, not God's system. The stuff, Jesus says, of worldly rulers, authorities, and benefactors. This greatness measures your value by what you do, and what you are able to achieve. To be great in this way is to be recognized and approved and exalted in the sight of men. And for me to be the greatest is also to let you know: you are not.

So what does Jesus say about that? Very simply: not so with you. Because while greatness is the world's system, the Gospel is our Lord's way of doing things. The Gospel which measures your value not by what you do, but what Jesus has done for you. The Gospel which is not something you achieve, but what you receive. The Gospel which recognizes, approves, and exalts those the world often casts off, ignores, and considers worthless.

Greatness and Gospel - the two couldn't be more opposite.

So why then were the apostles arguing that day about which of them was the greatest? Well, why do we? Yes, we do it too. Perhaps in a more subtle way than the apostles, but are we not constantly measuring ourselves against others, trying to determine who is more successful, more faithful, more confessional, more pious, more missional, more doctrinal, more liturgical, more on fire, more involved, more knowledgeable, more this, more that . . . or in other words, trying to figure out who is the greatest. Pastors do it, congregations do it, you do it too. It is the sinner in us, the pride in us, wanting recognition for what I am and what I have achieved. Even if those things I want recognition for are good and churchly! The devil can take what is good and turn it upside down.

No, Jesus says. Not so with you.

And we need to hear that! First of all so that we will repent and say: God be merciful to me, the sinner. But even more we need to hear those words in this way: that it is not so with you because it does not need to be so with you. You do not have to be the greatest or earn your Lord's approval - you have it already. You do not have

to climb over others to the top of the heap to be worth something - the Son of God came down to you because He considered you someone worth dying for. You don't have to be an olympic champion in the Christian life - Jesus has already given you the gold medal: the promise of everlasting life with Him in His kingdom. And you simply cannot get any greater than that!

And all this is yours because you have been Baptized. Which was our Lord's idea, not yours. Before you could do anything to earn it or deserve it, the Son of God came for you and made you His own. He called you out of this world and established you in His kingdom. He forgave your sins, gave you a new life as a child of God, and gave you all the promises that go along with such an exalted status. And so in Baptism we renounce the devil and all his works and . . . all his ways . . . including his ways of greatness. The things of this world are no longer who we are. The Lord has put His name on us. We are His.

And so when we strive for worldly greatness, we are acting out of character; we are not being who we are. We are, in fact, denying our Baptism and seeking something else, something better, something higher. As if there were something else, something better, something higher than that! But it's an easy trap to fall in to because, as St. Paul put it, we have this treasure in jars of clay. Or in other words, when we look at the church - well, it doesn't look so great. We see fighting and schisms and disputes. Then we look at ourselves and see not a saint but a sinner. We look at other Christians and see shortcomings and failures. And we think: Baptism must not be so powerful. We need to add something. We need to make these greater - greater in our eyes and in the eyes of the world.

No, Jesus says. Not so with you.

For what Jesus has done cannot be added to or made greater. And when we try to make the things of God greater in the eyes of the world and on their terms, we are really doing the opposite, and taking away from what Jesus has done. We are focusing on what we can do, instead of what He has done, and so becoming not more and greater, but in reality poorer and less than what our Lord would have us be.

So Jesus sets forth another way. Rather, He says, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. Not only because that is what Jesus did, but because when that is how we live we are confessing with our lives what Jesus did, and that He did it for me. That I do not have to make myself great for I am already great in the eyes of my Saviour. That I do not have to be served by others because Jesus has come to serve me, and so now I am free to

serve others. That I do not lord but forgive, for Christ Jesus my Lord has forgiven me. And while none of this looks great in the eyes of the world, and is often despised by the world, it matters not. We live in a kingdom the world knows not, and that kingdom lives in us. A kingdom of grace, of forgiveness, of dying and rising. A kingdom where the King dies for His subjects, and gives us His throne. Where the King does not levy taxes on us and demand satisfaction for our sins, but pays it all Himself, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood, at Calvary. And then in rising from the dead, a kingdom where the King lives to give all that He has achieved to you. His Good Friday your Good Friday, His Easter your Easter, His Heaven, your Heaven.

And in order to give you all of this, Jesus gave one more thing: His apostles and the pastors that come after them. Folks like Bartholomew. To pour this kingdom into you in the waters of Holy Baptism. To speak this kingdom into your hearts in the words of the Holy Gospel. And to put this kingdom into your mouths in the body and blood of Jesus, the Lord's Supper. Apostles and pastors are not great, but servants, for they serve the great ones who come as guests and recline at the Lord's Table: you. And they serve in the name of the Great Servant, whose gifts these are.

As so you are never so great as when you fall on your knees in repentance and receive His forgiveness, and when you open your mouth hungering and thirsting for righteousness and receive His body and blood. You are never so great as when you lower yourself to serve, to love the unlovable, and to forgive the unforgivable. You are never so great, for in these ways you receive, confess, and live a greatness not your own, but given to you. The greatness of your Saviour. The greatness of the cross.

That is a greatness that Bartholomew and the other disciples and all of us must learn. To trust in the Lord with all your heart, and not to lean on your own understanding, as the Proverb said. For this kind of greatness does not come naturally to us. In fact, what comes naturally to us is the way the world thinks, and its greatness. And so the Christian life is never easy, but a constant struggle to trust in a way that seems so weak and backwards. But hear again what Jesus tells you about this struggle through St. Paul, that we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. There's hope in those words. Not of our victory, but the Lord's victory. That while in this world we can (and will!) be afflicted, we cannot be defeated.

And Bartholomew learned that, as it turns out he got what he had been arguing for - just not in the way he expected. For he became the greatest apostle - he received the greatest suffering in his martyrdom: when he was skinned alive and then crucified. But he was not defeated. The Lord who gave him life, and then gave His life for Bartholomew, gave him life again. Eternal life, in a Kingdom which has no end. And so it is with us. By believing as Bartholomew did and living as He lived, we may or may not end up on the wrong side of the flaying knife and nailed by those considered great in this world. And it matters not. For the kingdom and life that we receive here the world cannot take away. That is Jesus' promise for you, guaranteed by the empty tomb.

So go ahead and love, serve, forgive, and maybe even lay down your life a time or two. Confess to the world what true greatness really is, and in whom it is really found.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.