

Deep Change (Week 4) - Real Greatness
Yesterday's Sermon - In 10 Bullet Points or Less

1) Chp. 4 in our Lenten book offers a critique of our current understanding of popularity, success, and greatness, and pulls us back to a more biblical take on all three. Yesterday, we used the sermon to focus on the last in that list - greatness.

2) We focused our attention on the last time Jesus returned to that familiar theme in His teaching, found in Luke 22.24-27. It's not even the only time on the Thursday of the Last Supper that He talks about it: prior to eating the meal, Jesus washes the disciples' feet and uses it as a teachable moment for them (John 13.14-16).

3) The first thing Jesus tells us about greatness is that we shouldn't take cues about it from the world. In Jesus' day, the so-called "great" would have been the Roman authorities, who really only cared about themselves and, more incredibly, demanded the praise and acclaim of those they ruled, despite not caring one iota for them.

4) But, remember, this warning about false greatness isn't aimed at the outside world, but His disciples. Each of us possess what Nietzsche would call "a will to power"; several centuries earlier, the reformer Martin Luther agreed by observing all human beings seemed to be curved in and around themselves, in a kind of centripetal death spiral.

5) So if power, getting our way, and personal excellence isn't greatness, what is? Jesus says that it's becoming two groups that occupied the lower rungs of His culture - the youngest and newest, and bond-servants. As Nicolas of Cusa, the great medieval church leader and philosopher said it, "In humility alone lies true greatness."

6) Jesus drives His point home by asking His disciple who is greater - the one reclining at the table eating the meal or the one serving it? It's not what they thought - it's the one serving, not the one being served. Thus, if as a Christian, I am more interested in what you get than what you give, or if you measure your faith community by what you take from it, not what you invest in it, boy, did I ever pick the wrong religion...

7) M. Eugene Boring, renowned American New Testament scholar, writes "From the beginning of His life to the end, Jesus was first and foremost a servant, and He asks the same of His followers." This speaks to the very character and identity of Christ Himself: He's not the one eating the meal, He's the one serving it. Jesus wasn't a "be served" kinda guy, and we who claim and carry His name can't be that way either.



8) This isn't easy. It was for His disciples either. Bottom line, this entails relearning what to care about, what to value, who to value, and how to live. It requires a comprehensive retrofitting, a reversal, maybe even a rebirth.

9) Make no mistake - Christ is calling us to greatness, but His brand of greatness, not ours. United Church of Christ pastor Vicki Kemper summarizes what Jesus is saying well when she writes as follows: "The power to change the world doesn't come from the top down or the outside in. True success—the capacity to love, liberate, and empower—is an inside-out, bottom-up job. Being great is not about having or getting the right stuff; it's about giving up and giving away. The path worth following is not the four-lane highway that leads to a corner office but the dusty trail of personal transformation. There are no shortcuts, just lots of people needing you to stand with them and work with them for a better day, even when no one else is looking. You wanna be great? Jesus asks. Fine, but you'd better know what you're in for."

Be Great This Week

1) Pray about it. And do it repeatedly. This is soul-rending, soul-reshaping stuff. You can't do it alone. You do it with God – better said, you let God do it within and to you – or you don't do it at all. What if every morning this week you simply prayed something like, "Lord God, may I find true greatness by being a servant. Let me serve more than I demand to be served, and let me give more than I expect to take, amen."

2) Find a way to serve that flies under the radar. Do something small and specific – at home, at work, or at church. Once you've stealth-served once, look for a second way to do it, then a third, and so on. And, rest assured, as Jesus Himself taught at the beginning of Matthew 6 during the Sermon on the Mount, that which you do in the shadows undetected by others, God sees and applauds.

3) Be deliberate as you go about your days to pay attention to those who serve you and others. Go out of your way to thank and encourage them. If appropriate, let them know that they are modeling Jesus for you.

4) Bring the best out in someone else. Help them succeed, help them thrive, and, as they do, celebrate their achievement and growth. Be that kind of person where you serve at KirkWood, and to those with whom you serve.

5) For a week, give up the power games we so often play with each other. Don't try to get your way, and don't manipulate others to your point of view. Be the one in the office, group, or committee who is seeking to serve everyone else and your collective work, be the person who listens and finds merit in someone else's perspective before demanding that they do likewise for you.

6) As the week comes to a close 5-6 days from now, spend time reflecting, in prayer or in writing, on how all this has affected you. How did you feel? How has your perspective widened, deepened, or shifted? How much closer do you feel to Jesus? How much more do you understand how He thinks, feels, and sees the world? In what new ways have you experienced the beautifully-upside down message and meaning of His good news?