

Fourth Sunday in Lent

April 3, 2011

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Matthew 20:17-28

"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the 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. On the third day he will be raised to life!" Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. "What is it you want?" he asked. 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." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, 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." When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. 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." (NIV)

Would you rather have people serve you or would you rather be the one to serve others? Do you like to be waited on hand and foot, or do you find satisfaction in taking care of the needs of another? Being the father of three young children, I certainly know what my kids prefer. They like to be served. If you look at our American culture I would have to say the same. Why do so many people go out to restaurants? Isn't part of it so we can sit back and have others do the work, sit back and be served? Or did Gandhi have it right when he said *"to find yourself you must lose yourself in the service of others?"* Are you the type of person that enjoys making people happy? Are you willing to serve, even doing the dirty work if you have to, so that others can be comfortable? This morning as we turn to God's Word I want us to consider the question whether it is:

Better to serve or be served?

There is no questioning what Jesus came to earth to do. He came to serve. He served with His teaching and preaching. He served with great miracles of provision and healing. He was always serving others in love. Now, for the third time, Jesus speaks to His disciples about just how far the Son of God will go to serve them. *"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the 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. On the third day he will be raised to life!"* Jesus is going to Jerusalem to carry out the work for which God sent Him. He is going to serve by offering up His own life. That would mean suffering, not only by the hands of His own people and leaders, but also by the hands of the Gentiles. The heathen leaders, the Romans, will mock, and flog, and crucify Him. This is what Jesus is willing to do to

serve the world. And Jesus' service has a purpose. It will not end in defeat - on the third day Jesus says "**he will be raised to life!**"

No one has ever or will ever serve us like Jesus did. He serves us by His perfect life and innocent suffering and death. There is no comparison to what Jesus would suffer and what Jesus would do for His disciples, for us, for all. There is no comparing anyone to the One who willingly became obedient to death - even death on the cross for sinners. We especially see this when we take a good look at the attitude and actions of Jesus' disciples. For after Jesus reveals this shocking truth, this is what we read: "**Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. "What is it you want?" he asked. 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."** Are you serious? Jesus talks about betrayal, about suffering, about the cross, about dying, and now Salome, the mother of James and John comes and asks that her two sons get the best seats in Jesus' kingdom! Salome was a dedicated follower of Jesus, one who would stand by the cross, and come out early Sunday morning to the tomb, but what a bold request. She asks, not for herself but for her boys, for places of honor at Jesus' right and left. Jesus explains they don't know what they are asking for at this time.

Jesus isn't about set up a powerful, glorious, earthly kingdom. He is going to establish a spiritual and an eternal kingdom by drinking a cup of suffering unlike any other. He is going to suffer God's wrath upon sin - so that we might once again be right with God. Only Jesus could drink such a cup, but Jesus' answer reminds these disciples they too will suffer for Him. The glory they seek is not for Jesus to give at this time. God will prepare for them a different kind of glory.

And guess how all the other disciples felt about this request? "**When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.**" Again are you serious? Jesus just had told them how He would serve them by enduring mockery, by being handed over to His enemies, by being crucified, and now they argue and compete with one another because James and John tried to get ahead of them in Jesus' kingdom. They are very mad because they too want the places of power and honor and glory. The answer to our question is pretty clear from the disciples perspective here - they want to be served!

Aren't we very often just like them? Do ever seek honor, and glory, and power, and wealth, and praise for ourselves? Do want people to look up to us and see how great we are? I'm sure James and John didn't have the worst intentions here, they wanted to be at Jesus' side, they wanted to serve in Jesus' kingdom. But they also wanted to serve on their terms. They were not quite ready to do the dirty work. They wanted authority and positions of honor. Dear friends, do we ever look at Christ's Church in a similar way? Are we ever out for ourselves? Do we look down at some of the work that Jesus asks of us as being below us? Do we ever sin by wanting to serve on our terms? Do we want authority and positions of honor? Do we ever get envious or jealous of others in Christ's church? Then our thinking and our doing is as backwards as these misinformed disciples.

We need Jesus' forgiveness. We also need His guidance. "**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." Jesus points to the rulers of his time as an example of those who rule by their authority. Both the Greek verbs here contain the idea of force, of using power and authority to get others to act the way they want. But Jesus says not to be like them. This is not the way of Christ's church. Those in God's kingdom don't do a single thing because they are forced to do it. It is a kingdom of grace. It is a kingdom where we gladly serve one another. Greatness is in being the servant to all.

Again no one comes close to being the servant of all like Jesus. In fact, by being a servant of all is how Jesus established this great kingdom. He paid the ransom, the full price to buy us back. The price was costly - Jesus needed to give His life. And that is what our Savior gave to set us free. Now you are I are truly free. We are free from sin's power and eternal punishment. We are free from the control of the devil. We are free from the fear of death and hell. We are free to live and serve as God's children.

So as free children of God is it better to serve or be served? As we study God's Word, as we look at these words before us, may we confidently reply that with Jesus the answer is both. With Jesus it is good to serve and be served. Can't we say the very same about why we belong and come to church? We come to be served and to serve. It is good to be served by Jesus - to hear His Word - to receive His supper - to listen again and again to how Jesus served us by giving His life to save us. Think of the example of Mary who, unlike Martha who was too busy serving, first took the time to be served by listening to Jesus' Word. It is also good to be served by our fellow Christians who love and care for us.

But Jesus has also teaches us how great it is to serve. This service isn't forced or something we have to do. We serve a Savior whose love compels us. We begin to realize what a privilege it is to be able to serve our great God. We begin to realize what a privilege it is to serve God's people. We serve others in love. We find greatness in even the smallest of tasks because as Jesus will say on the Last Day ***"whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me"*** (Matthew 25). Jesus turns worldly thinking and ways upside down. May be always be His servants for with Jesus is better both to serve and be served. Amen.