

July 9, 2023

The Gospel of Luke
LXIV. Final Words
Luke 22:24-38

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

At the end of the Passover meal, on the night of His arrest, Jesus had said to His disciples that one of them was about to betray Him. This declaration went around the room like an electric current – the disciples turning to one another and questioning who among them would do this.¹ But, fallen human nature being what it is, somehow this discussion over who might betray Jesus had quickly morphed into a debate over which one of them was actually the best and greatest disciple among them. Jesus must have been immensely frustrated by this. He had just spoken of His upcoming sacrifice for them – “*This is my body broken for you . . .*” And now here they are debating over which of them is number one. But, even if He was frustrated, He doesn’t show it. Instead, He uses their debate over who’s number one to begin one last round of teaching – His final words to them before His arrest, before His cross, before His death.

“And he said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them . . . But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.’” It is one of the most radical, counter-cultural things Jesus ever said – right up there with, “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*”² “*The greatest among you,*” says Jesus, “*is the one who serves.*” Greatness, according to Kingdom of God, is not measured by any of the standards we human beings typically use – like fame or wealth or power or self-assertion. Rather greatness, says Jesus, is measured by the exercise of genuine humility in relation to others – by a genuine humility which seeks to serve others, not to have others serve them. Could anything be more upside-down than that? What the world calls greatness, Jesus calls nothing. And what the world calls nothing – humble, self-effacing, quiet acts of daily self-sacrifice for the sake of others – Jesus calls greatness.

I came across this several years ago in the Atlantic Monthly magazine. I don’t offer it as vindication for what Jesus here commands – the command of Jesus is vindicated solely by the fact that it is the Word of God addressed to us. Still, I think this is a helpful insight into the life of greatness Jesus is prescribing. It comes from an article entitled, “There’s More to Life than Being Happy.” And in this article the author, Emily Smith, notes that on the whole Americans are pretty happy. But, at the same time, studies also show that most Americans do not believe their lives to be meaningful or to have a clear purpose. Smith finds that an intriguing picture – happy but feeling empty – and so she digs deeper into the studies to discern why and how this could be so. Quoting the research, she states: “*Leading a happy life, the psychologists find, is associated with being a ‘taker’ while leading a meaningful life corresponds with being a ‘giver’*”.³

In other words, the happiness we Americans claim to possess is actually a rather self-serving sort of thing – indicative, say the studies, of a rather self-absorbed, and even selfish approach to life in which we are always looking to take from others, to be served by others, to bend others to the meeting of our needs without concern for the needs of others. Meanwhile, the meaningful life we say we long for but do not possess involves the sort of giving and self-sacrifice that often runs completely counter to the pursuit of our private happiness. A meaningful life, says the studies, is reported only by those who have allowed their lives to become hopelessly entangled with the lives of others, by those who often set aside their own desires to help meet the needs of others, by those who see their task in life to be giving, sharing, serving. And what did Jesus say? *“The greatest among you is the one who serves.”* And then, to really drive His point home: *“For I am among you as the one who serves.”*

And so we, like the disciples, are being deeply challenged here by the first of Jesus’ final words. What form of greatness do we have in view – that of the world or that of the Kingdom? And what is the greatness we are daily pursuing – solely to get what we want out of life and out of others? Or rather to be of service to others?

Well, that settled, Jesus now turns His attention to Simon Peter – who is actually the one Jesus has named to be the leader of the disciples, the “rock” upon which He will build His church. He announces to Peter something which ought to have terrified Peter down to his bones: *“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat . . .”* Peter responds with brash bravado: *“Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.”* To which Jesus answers, *“I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”* Sifted by the Tempter, Peter’s faith is about to be sorely tested. And despite his brave declaration, Peter will fail the test.

Which is what makes the rest of what Jesus said to Peter so very, very important: *“But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”* Sifted by Satan, Peter will indeed fail this testing of his faith. He will, indeed, three times deny even knowing Jesus before the rooster crows. But though Peter will fail this testing of his faith, because Jesus is praying for him, Peter’s faith itself will not fail. Because Jesus is praying for him, Peter’s faith will lead him to recover from his failure. Lead him to repentance and to Christ’s mercy – such that, when all is said and done, Peter’s faith will come out of this testing failure much stronger than it was before. Strong enough even to strengthen the weaker faith of his fellow disciples. This testing will reveal to Peter the weakness of his faith. But the grace of Jesus Christ – Christ praying for him – will meet him in his failure to restore and even to increase his faith.

That is an extraordinary promise – and it applies to all of us. For Jesus is even now at the right hand of the Father interceding for us.⁴ Every day we, too, are tested by temptations – sifted like wheat, as Jesus puts it. And in those temptations the true measure of our faith in Jesus is revealed – not the measure of the faith as we proclaim, but the measure of the faith as it truly resides in our hearts and in our heads. Each and every day of our lives – in ways both great and small, in ways both obvious to us and hidden from us – temptations and testing come upon us which reveal the true depth of our commitment to Christ and our fidelity to His Way.

And we fail more often than not – because we are still sinners through and through. We fail more often than not – which is why our worship always begins with a Prayer of Confession and an Assurance of Pardon. But to know that Jesus is praying for us in our testing, to know that Jesus is watching over us in His grace even when we fail the testing – means that we, like Peter, can always turn again to Him after our failure and not only be forgiven, but made stronger in our faith through His grace working through our failure. To be made better able to stand against the next testing; to be made better able to stand up for Jesus the next time. The second final word: His mercy is always upon us.

And then Jesus speaks one last word to His disciples. He reminds them of how, when they first began to follow Him, He sent them out with no moneybag or spare sandals, but simply trusting in Him.⁵ Now, He tells them, a new and far more difficult moment is upon them: *“But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one.”* And what is the reason things are about to change so dramatically for the disciples? *“For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’”* Jesus is using strong imagery to explain to His disciples, one last time, that the cross awaits Him. He will be, as the prophets foretold, *“numbered with the transgressors”* – Jesus, the only innocent One, bearing in His death the sins of the whole world. And He is telling His disciples that His crucifixion will mean a new and difficult reality for them – for they will now be numbered as His followers by those who have put Him to death. The world is going to turn against them, He is telling them – just as it has turned against Him.

But the disciples do not understand. In their confusion, they take His spiritual warning and turn it into a military call to arms: *“Look, Lord, we already have two swords!”* Jesus responds by saying, *“It is enough.”* Meaning not that those two swords will be enough – meaning, simply, that He has now said all that He can say to prepare them. Meaning that the time has now come for the events of Good Friday to begin to unfold. The disciples do not understand Him that night – but very soon they will come to understand not only what He was saying to them about things getting much more difficult and dangerous, but also just what exactly it means that Jesus Christ, the only innocent One, freely chose to allow Himself to be *“numbered with the transgressors.”*

So what exactly does Jesus mean by this third word, this final warning? He is telling them that, from now on, to be His disciple is not going to be easy – in fact, they will face opposition as they seek to live as He has taught them, shown them. To be His disciple, from now on, will be to seek to live a life contrary to the ways of the world, contrary to the ordinary, accepted understandings of not only how to live, but what our lives are for. Jesus is telling them that while He was with them, they were guided and protected in ways they no longer will be. But once He is crucified, risen, and ascended, the whole world will turn on them because they belong to Him.

But He is also saying to them – and this perhaps is the most important thing – He is also saying to them that everything God had promised, the long sought after salvation of all things, is just about to be accomplished in His death. And that even though discipleship is going to be a difficult, challenging, even sacrificial road for them – they will have the deep joy of living out before the world the great glory of what God had done in Jesus. They will have the opportunity to bear witness to the great gospel truth that God was in Christ, not counting our sins against us, but reconciling the world to Himself. The disciples – and we who are His disciples now – simply

by how we live as much as by what we say, have the privilege of bearing witness to the world of the goodness and glory of our God, bearing witness to what God has done for the world in Jesus. It's not going to be easy, Jesus tells them and us – but to you will belong the joy of declaring the Good News of God to this world so filled with bad news.

I suppose there are any number of ways to flesh out what this means for us in our own discipleship today. But I am drawn to one of my favorite Max Lucado stories. Lucado was seated on a plane next to an orthodox Jewish rabbi. Lucado had his Bible open upon his lap, studying the Ten Commandments. The rabbi, seeing this, leaned over and said, *“I see you like Jewish authors.”* So began a wonderful conversation. Lucado told the rabbi he was puzzling over the commandment, *“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.”* The rabbi thought about that for a moment, and then said to him, *“Don't think language, think lifestyle.”* Lucado asked what he meant, and the rabbi said. *“Let me tell you a story.”* He told Lucado to imagine a Manhattan skyscraper. Everyone in the skyscraper works for the CEO, who has his office on the very top floor. Most of the workers have never seen the CEO, but they have seen his daughter. She works in the building for her father – and she exploits her family connection to her benefit at every possible opportunity. The rabbi continues:

One morning she approaches Bert, the guard. “I'm hungry, Bert. Go down the street and buy me a Danish.”

The demand places Bert in a quandary. He's on duty. Leaving his post puts the building at risk. But his boss's daughter insists, “Come on now; hurry up.”

What option does he have? As he leaves, he says nothing but thinks something like, “If the daughter is so bossy, what does that say about her father?”

She's only getting started. Munching on her muffin, she bumps into a paper-laden secretary. “Where are you going with all those papers?”

“To have them bound for an afternoon meeting.”

“Forget the meeting. Come to my office and vacuum the carpet.”

“But I was told . . .”

“And I am telling you something else.”

The woman has no choice. After all, this is the boss's daughter speaking. Which causes the secretary to question the wisdom of the boss.

And on the daughter goes. Making demands. Calling shots. Interrupting schedules. Never invoking the name of her dad. Never leveraging her comments with, “My dad said . . .”

No need to.

Isn't she the boss's child? Doesn't the child speak for the father? And so Bert abandons his post. An assistant fails to finish a task. And more than one employee questions the wisdom of the man upstairs. “Does he really know what he is doing?” they wonder.

The rabbi paused here. We both felt the plane nosing downward. His remaining time was short. But his point was clear. The girl dishonored the name of her father, not with vulgar language, but with insensitive living. Keep this up and the whole building will be second-guessing the CEO.

But my traveling partner wasn't finished. He scratched his bearded chin and lifted both eyebrows as he proposed, "But what if the daughter acted differently?" and then proceeded to recast the story.

Rather than demand a muffin from Bert, she brings a muffin to Bert. "I thought of you this morning," she explains. "You arrive so early. Do you have time to eat?" And she hands him the gift.

En route to the elevator she bumps into a woman with an armful of documents. "My, I'm sorry. Can I help?" the daughter offers. The assistant smiles, and the two carry the stacks down the hallway.

And so the daughter engages the people. She asks about their families, offers to bring them coffee. New workers are welcomed, and hard workers are applauded. She, through kindness and concern, raises the happiness level of the entire company.

She does so not even mentioning her father's name. Never does she declare, "My father says . . ." There is no need to. Is she not his child? Does she not speak on his behalf? Reflect his heart? When she speaks, they assume she speaks for him. And because they think highly of her, they think highly of her father.

They've not seen him.

They've not met him.

But they know his child, so they know his heart. . .

"You know how the story ends?" the rabbi asked as we were taxiing to a stop. Apparently he had a punch line.

"No, I don't. How?"

"The daughter takes the elevator to the top floor to see her father. When she arrives, he is waiting in the doorway. He's aware of her good works and has seen her kind acts. People think more highly of him because of her. And he knows it. As she approaches, he greets her with six words."

The rabbi paused and smiled.

"What are they?" I urged, never expecting to hear an orthodox Jew quote Jesus.

"Well done, good and faithful servant."⁶

We are His disciples. Which means we are not only, by our words, bearers of the Good News of the Gospel to the world. But are also, by our actions, ambassadors of the One who has reconciled us to Himself – representing through our deeds His profound power and desire to be reconciled to all on earth.

¹ Luke 22:21-23.

² Matthew 5:44.

³ Emily Esfahani Smith, “There’s More to Life Than Being Happy,” The Atlantic Monthly (January, 2013), accessed on-line at [There's More to Life Than Being Happy - The Atlantic](#).

⁴ Romans 8:34.

⁵ Luke 9:1-6.

⁶ Max Lucado, It’s Not About Me (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2004), pp. 141-146.