

# The Heart of a Servant

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**Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church**

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In our Gospel reading today, we find Jesus focused on His travel to Jerusalem. Jesus is markedly determined and intent on this journey. Jerusalem is where He will fulfill His primary reason for coming to earth – to die for all the sins of all the sinners of this world including yours and mine.

The journey started far to the north and He is now at some point between the town of Ephraim and the City of Jericho. His disciples have been with Him all the way. They face an arduous journey from Jericho up to Jerusalem. It is a mere 18 miles - only a day's journey, but it is a climb of 4,000 feet in altitude from the Plain of Jericho at 800 feet below sea level to the Mount of Olives at 3,000 feet above sea level. It is the same trek that all Passover Jews from the north must make. It will be a hard journey with the added challenge that Jesus knows what He is about to face in Jerusalem. He will be arrested, beaten, spit upon, crowned with a crown of sharp thorns, stripped of His clothes and dignity, scourged, face three tribunals, the Jewish religious leaders, the Jewish political leader, Herod, and the Roman governor, Pilate. Following all that He will be forced to climb still another hill - Calvary and be nailed to a cross, naked, and die. He knows all this will happen and He knows He must accept this ordeal for all the sinners of this world, including each of us, and He willingly does all this for us in love, humility, and with the heart of a servant.

As He travels along, knowing what is to come, He also knows He must teach His disciples (and that includes you and me) about

these things. He had already told His disciples about the ordeal He is facing previously while in the provincial area of Caesarea-Philippi. He told them that three days after His death, He would arise from death. A response comes from Peter who rebuked Jesus for saying these things. Then, Jesus rebuked Peter (and Satan) for following the thinking of the world.

Later, a second time, as they continued on the journey, outside the village of Capernaum, Jesus once again foretold His death and resurrection. As they traveled on toward Capernaum the disciples ignored the words of Jesus and argued among themselves about who was the greatest. At Capernaum, Jesus confronted them about their debate and taught them about humility and being a servant. He taught them that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. For some reason, the Words of Jesus once again fell on deaf ears.

Today, we hear that Jesus and His disciples are approaching the City of Jericho, AND for a third time, Jesus tells His disciples about the events that are about to occur - the arrest, the condemnation, the brutal abuse, His death, and after three days His resurrection. In response, two of the three disciples in Jesus' inner circle, James and John, make a proposal to Jesus. They ask that He install them at His right and left hand when He achieves glory. In the Gospel of St. Matthew, we read that it was really their mother, Salome, (who was Jesus' aunt being the sister of His earthly mother, Mary) who made this request to Jesus. So when St. Mark notes that James and John approached Jesus with this request, it was their mother who asked for them. Now, to be sure, James and John, no doubt, had this selfish request in their hearts even though their mother seems to have verbalized it for them. They wanted seats of power in Jesus' kingdom. Despite all the previous

teachings of Jesus, they were glory bound, or so they thought. But Jesus had more pressing matters on His mind. The reading says that He was leading the group. He was ahead of them all on the trek to Jerusalem. He was intent on His mission. He had just catechized His disciples regarding His impending death and resurrection, teaching them the sheer humiliation He must suffer at the hands of the religious and civil leaders. Palm Sunday and the Passover were near. His time to go to Jerusalem was at hand.

Chapter 11, the next chapter in the Gospel of St. Mark, begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. All this is on Jesus' mind as He walks forward. Yet, immediately after Jesus instructed His disciples about what He would soon face for the sake of mankind these two brothers make this outrageous request. And, this time, there is no rebuking. Jesus, perhaps in pity, says to them, "***You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?***" (v. 38). These two power-hungry disciples were willing to agree to anything as long as they had seats of power, and so they respond, "***We are able,***" (v. 39a) not fully understanding the gravity of Jesus' question.

Now, Peter was probably one of Mark's sources for his Gospel and may have been the source of this story. As one of the Big Three (Peter, James, and John—all privileged to be with Jesus at the raising of Jarius' daughter from death, at His Transfiguration, and soon at Gethsemane), Peter must have been acutely aware of James' and John's attempt to edge him out—to narrow the Big Three to the Big Two. And we hear that his anger spread to all the other disciples. Mark tells us that the ten were indignant with John and James. Then, Jesus tells ALL the disciples, "***Whoever of you wants to become first among***

***you, shall be servant of all***" (10:44)—and then Jesus holds up His own sacrificial service as a model for all disciples (10:45).

The disciples consistently failed to comprehend either Jesus' passion predictions or His instruction on discipleship following the three instances when He taught them. What Jesus described was so different from their view of the expected Messiah that they just don't "get it." It is as if their spiritual eyes had been focused in one place so long that now, with that Messiah in their midst, they could not refocus their eyes to see Him clearly. They only had the existing Jewish worldview in mind – Jesus will be a temporal king like the former great kings, David and Solomon, during the Jewish Golden Age. And the disciples wanted a share in the glory. They don't see that Jesus would be raised to glory for selfless sacrifice. They couldn't grasp that He would give up power and prestige and honor and His dignity to serve all humans, including you and me. (It is ironic that Jesus restores the sight to two blind men before and after this set of three events. The restoration of vision serves as bookends around the stories of the disciples who are themselves spiritually blind. Linking these miracles of healing with these events was not a coincidence.) Jesus wanted His disciples to understand the role they were to follow – to serve others in complete humility and selflessness.

The proposition of James and John focused on what Martin Luther defined as the theology of glory. The focus of this theology is on glory in its earthly context. By this, we generally mean the power and authority that Jesus described in His teaching about the gentiles when He said, ***"Those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them."*** James and John were probably thinking of this kind of glory. They were

operating under the assumption that Jesus would rule over a renewed Israeli empire. And they wanted to be the top men in His government. (After all, they were first cousins – that should count for something?) Under a theology of glory, life becomes a ladder. Each little victory or improvement brings a person one rung closer to the top which is always just out of sight. At death, if all goes according to plan, a person will enter the heavenly courts with a nicely wrapped gift for God that includes an equitable balance of good versus bad actions, a moral scorecard, if you will. This image may seem ridiculous, but if we're honest, it characterizes more of our religious life and mentality than we might care to admit. If like the disciples, we allow ourselves to live this theory, we communicate that God exists for our benefit, for our happiness, for our self-fulfillment, and for our personal transformation. Can you see how this is what James and John were thinking? Now, none of those things are necessarily bad things, and God isn't necessarily opposed to them, but God in Christ cannot be reduced to a means to our selfish ends. He is the end Himself! Jesus showed His disciples, and us, where real glory is found. The real glory is found in the theology of the cross, the glory of the cross.

Jesus was explaining the glory of the cross when James and John came to Him and made their request. So, really, James and John were asking to be crucified, one on Jesus' right and the other on Jesus' left. (It turns out those positions were reserved for two robbers.) No wonder Jesus said to them, ***"You do not know what you are asking."*** They demonstrated that they did not understand at all. No, the glory that Jesus was to receive came as a result of the humility and self-sacrifice in the brutality and death He suffered as our servant and substitute on the cross. Jesus had already taught this lesson earlier when He challenged His disciples (and us) to take up their cross and

follow Him. And, even though they missed His point in the earlier lesson and, once again, this time, they would come to see it in the future.

So, Jesus' glory does not just refer to His power and authority. It also refers to His victory on the cross. And, when we look at the shame of the cross, instead of shame, we see that glory as He wins salvation for us. Jesus would bring glory to God by earning salvation for us with His suffering and death. And following that cross-bearing, His glory would come in His resurrection and being seated – where? At the right hand of God. The seat of power and authority.

Our sinful human nature is very much at home in the theology of glory. The world of power. We see how the powerful dominate. How the boss rules. How the leader commands. How the bully berates and is overbearing.

But hear what Jesus taught us in today's Gospel, using the world view of those around him: He said, ***“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.”*** Jesus used the word of the pagans around Him for His example of the theology of glory. There is no right and wrong in that world. There is only the accumulation and exercise of power. And, in our sinfulness, that is our natural attitude based on original sin into which we are born in this world. We cannot fault James and John, for if we do, we are doing exactly what they were doing...we are elevating ourselves as sinners, above them.

We are just like James and John. We think glory is all about power, authority, and control. We want that kind of glory. We want to be important. We want honor. We want to be number one. We want to be the center of attention. We are greedy and

we are self-centered. But Jesus tells us that the truly great are those who serve, and like the disciples, we often don't see that because we are not interested in serving. We are caught up in our own world view of how to define glory. Jesus tells us that the leader should take up the vocation of a slave, and we don't see it because we are not interested in being slaves. We turn a blind eye because we aren't interested in doing things Jesus' way. We want to do things our way. We want what we want and when we want it now.

A theology of the cross defines life in terms of giving rather than taking, self-sacrifice rather than self-protection, dying rather than killing. It reorients us away from our natural inclination toward a theology of the cross by showing that we win by losing, we triumph through defeat, and we become rich by giving ourselves away. Can you see this in our world? But do you see it in Jesus? He was the embodiment of all of these. And Jesus taught that we should do the same.

Our Savior, Jesus, did not have a problem with His role as servant and slave. Just as He set the standard for us, He also kept that standard. And He did not give up on His disciples but continued to teach them in spite of their stubbornness. He taught them, ***“The Son of Man came NOT to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*** Even though we don't serve as we should – even though we don't adopt the role of a slave, as Jesus commands, Jesus still became the perfect servant for us. He did not give up on those 12 disciples and He did not and will not give up on us, His current disciples, either.

So, as we near the end of this season of Lent, as we walk with Jesus, and His disciples along the road closer and closer to Jerusalem, by what theology do you measure success? Are you

following a theology of glory – selfishly...or are you following a theology of the cross – selflessly. What do others see you doing? Are you a disciple of Jesus who wants all the glory now or are you willing to wait for the glory that comes by serving God and your neighbor?

Jesus did not give up on His original 12 disciples. Eleven of them found that in taking up their crosses and dying for their faith in Jesus, they inherited an eternal glory. They witnessed the theology of the cross right before their wide-opened eyes in the events in Jerusalem as they witnessed the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, just as He predicted. And they were compelled to record it all for us so that like them, our eyes would see, and we would follow the theology of the cross in our lives. With their eyes so opened to the truth and with their commitment to being witnesses, they were also sending us a message to convey the theology of the cross shown in the example and teachings of Jesus to others. And all this was, and is, to the glory of God through Jesus Christ.

May God grant that our lives follow in their footsteps, and the footsteps of our Master, Our Suffering Servant, our Savior, and our Redeemer, Jesus. Amen.