

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Ambitious Disciples

Luke 22:24-30

You might think that the Lord's Table is the last place where Jesus' followers should be having debates about greatness. After all, isn't the mood at the Lord's Supper supposed to be one of humility and service? But the disciples' internal strife actually follows naturally from what Jesus has just told them about how one of them will be betray him. Since none of them thinks they're capable of such a thing, they start suspecting one another. Each of them may be thinking, "I don't doubt my own faithfulness to Jesus, but I'm not so sure about yours." This could lead right into imagining that you're better than, or superior to, the disciple sitting next to you. It's no surprise, then, that they get into a dispute about who falls where in the loyalty rankings.

"Hold on," says Jesus. "What do you think this is, a gathering of regional power brokers? You read the local paper and watch the news. You've been down to the courthouse and seen firsthand how the Gentile authorities like to throw their weight around and flaunt their power. God's people have been living under their oppression, watching them hoard wealth and resources, all the while expecting us to address them as 'Benefactors.' That may be what greatness looks like in their world, their reality. But that's not the way it's supposed to be with you. You inhabit a different reality called the kingdom of God, where the standards of the present world get turned on their head."

But Jesus doesn't stop there. It's not enough for him to say that false greatness is on public display every day, especially in local politics. Jesus also wants his disciples to know what true greatness looks like. And he cites himself as the example. Jesus' disciples know that when people gather for a meal, seating matters. Where you sit is an indication of your importance. But Jesus highlights the fact that his whole life and ministry have been a case of not even having a seat at the table. "I'm not the one who's busy eating and drinking," says Jesus. "I'm the one who's busy serving." That's what power and greatness look like in the reign of God.

In God's kingdom, things operate by an alternative wisdom. As one writer has put it, "The way up starts with the way down."¹ One of the ways this strange wisdom is proclaimed and practiced is through the act of baptism, which we've witnessed here today. Baptism is a picture of salvation. It signifies the downward way of Christ, all the way into death, before being raised to life. Death and resurrection. So we rejoice that by God's grace through faith, Riley has been joined to Christ in his dying and rising. Riley has come before us today to identify himself with Christ and with a way of life in which how you serve is more important than where you sit.

Not that having a seat at the table isn't important. We'll come to the Lord's Supper later in our worship. But remember that in the life of the church, the way to the table passes through the water. And the water reminds us that the way up starts with the way down. As others have noted, in the community of Christ's people baptism is the great equalizer. No matter who you are, or where you come from, or where you went to school, or how

much you make, or where you live, or how God's gospel reached you, everybody who places their trust in Christ puts on the white robe, comes down the same set of steps into the water, and by the time we're through with you, you come out soaked from head to toe, dripping, shivering, trying to get your bearings and make your way back up the steps. It's a humbling experience in which you're stripped of all your pretensions. All your aspirations to worldly success and power get drowned, and the only status that matters is the one you share with the rest of God's children in this family of believers.

So then what becomes of ambition when you come into a community like this? Even after Jesus sets the disciples straight about true greatness, he still promises them a share in his future reign over the world. He assures them that they'll have prime seats with him at his table in the kingdom feast. Just as the Father is going to vindicate Jesus, so Jesus will vindicate his disciples, if they're faithful in the midst of opposition, strife, and temptation. It sounds like ambition and aspiration, and the exercise of power and authority, are still part of the picture in the life of the world to come. And if so, what does that mean for the way that we followers of Jesus participate in our risen Lord's reign, even now, in anticipation of the kingdom's full arrival?

It means that we need to view ambition through the lens of the cross. Remember that today's text is part of Jesus' farewell discourse with his disciples. Luke tells us that there wasn't just a meal, which we now call the Lord's Supper, but also lots of conversation after the meal. Jesus' purpose in this dialogue was to prepare the disciples further for his suffering and death, and to get them ready for their ongoing mission in the world. Within this mission, there would be a place for ambition. But it's not ambition as the present world defines it. It's ambition redirected toward kingdom of God purposes, and exercised in the form of servanthood.

Pope Francis once gave a TED Talk in which he commented on a biblically-based understanding of power. He said:

The more powerful you are, the more your actions will have an impact on people, the more responsible you are to act humbly. If you don't, your power will ruin you, and you will ruin the other. There is a saying in Argentina: "Power is like drinking gin on an empty stomach." You feel dizzy, you get drunk, you lose your balance, and you will end up hurting yourself and those around you, if you don't connect your power with humility and tenderness. Through [Christ-like] humility and concrete love, on the other hand, power—the highest, the strongest one—becomes a service, a force for good.²

In the life of the church, we're still learning how to practice cross-shaped ambition. In other words, ambition that's redirected toward doing good rather than harm. It would be easy for us to sit in our pews and point to many instances in society where individuals and groups have pursued their ambitions to the harm of others and the destruction of themselves. "But you are not to be like that," says Jesus (v. 26a). The problem is, we in the church are often like that. We who profess the name of Jesus Christ can be just as determined as anyone to climb the ladder of success and make a great name for ourselves. No church is immune. Every congregation has its stories of misused power, abuses of authority, the pursuit of prominence, and corrosive competition.

A. W. Tozer once wrote, "It is too bad that anything so obvious should need to be said at this late date, but from all appearances, we Christians have about forgotten the lesson so carefully taught by Paul: God's servants are not to be competitors, but co-workers."³ I'm not sure if Tozer had in mind particular passages from Paul's letters. The one printed in today's bulletin as the Scripture for reflection could have served the purpose well: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than

yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4). Paul then moves right into a description of the path that Christ took for our salvation. He “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place. . .” (vv. 7-9a). For Christ, the way up started with the way down. He went from the highest place to the lowest place, from the top to the bottom, in order to restore humankind to communion with God. And the pattern of Jesus becomes the pattern of life for his followers.

So as we gather here at the Lord’s Table today, we take our seats not as competitors but as co-workers. After all, we’re members of a kingdom that we didn’t get into by climbing our way up the ladder of holiness but by receiving what Jesus came down to bring us. He came to do the Father’s will. That was his ambition. It’s what drove him, energized him, and sustained him. And as he nears the completion of his task, Jesus looks around the table at his disciples and tells them, “And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me. . .” (v. 29).

God’s reign is given, not earned. It’s not the product of human ascent but of God’s descent. So don’t spend your ambition on trying to build your own personal kingdom according to the world’s definitions of greatness. Rather, exemplify true greatness by taking your ambition and redirecting it toward doing your part in serving God’s will and purposes in the world, whatever forms that may take in your life. Jesus says, “The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (v. 26b). Let us now serve one another as we break the bread and share the cup.

¹ Graham Tomlin, *Looking Through the Cross* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 137.

² Pope Francis, “Why the Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone,” TED Talk (April 2017).

³ A. W. Tozer, in *The Next Chapter After the Last*. Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 32, No. 13.