

Sunday between 16th and 22nd October [29]

Mark 10: (32-34) 35-45

Once there was the president of a large corporation. He was a powerful man – when he said “jump” people would ask, “How high?” Everyone was below him, and everyone had to answer to him. And this job came with nice benefits – a fancy house, nice car. But this man was different. He decided to take an upside-down approach to life. He decided that he didn’t want to be president anymore. Instead of climbing up the corporate ladder, he decided to climb down the corporate ladder. So, to everyone’s surprise, he applied for a lower position – the position of vice president. He got it, of course. He demoted himself, and made someone else president. Now he had someone above him.

But he wasn’t finished yet. He had an upside-down approach to life. He demoted himself again, this time to office executive. Now he had 15 people over him, and less pay. He wanted to go even lower, so he demoted himself again. Now he was an administrative assistant, and he had 200 people over him. His pay was going down, so he had to sell his house and move into a smaller one. But he wasn’t done yet. He was an upside-down thinker. He finally demoted himself to the lowest position in the company – he was in the post room, and everyone in the company was over him.

Would this ever happen in real life? Probably not. No one strives to be at the bottom, serving everybody else. Greatness is climbing to the top. Greatness is how many people you have answering to you. Greatness is power.

But God has an upside-down approach. God has set up the spiritual kingdom in an upside-down sort of way. God loves to contradict how our world thinks. In God’s upside-down kingdom, the greatest person is not the person who is at the top, who is in charge of everyone else and can tell everyone else what to do. In God’s kingdom, the greatest person is one who is at the bottom. It’s the one who answers and serves everyone. In God’s kingdom, that’s greatness.

Doesn’t that seem strange? It must have seemed strange to two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John. They had a completely different picture of “greatness.” They believed, just like everybody else, that Jesus had come into the world to help the Jews overthrow the Roman government. Someday, Jesus would re-establish the glorious kingdom of Israel, and he would be in charge, and we, the twelve apostles, would be at his side. We’re going to be the twelve vice presidents. We’re going to be in charge of everybody. James and John were part of Jesus’ inner circle, and they couldn’t wait to be number one and number two in Jesus’ future kingdom.

But Jesus says, “You don’t know what you are asking.” You don’t know what my kingdom is. It’s not an earthly kingdom. The twelve apostles aren’t going to be the twelve vice presidents someday. You’re thinking about greatness in a worldly way. God’s way is harder, more difficult, and not glorious at all. That’s why Jesus asked James and John, “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” The cup Jesus was talking about was that cup of humility, that cup of suffering and lowliness that he was going to experience in the not-so-distant future.

James and John didn’t understand that, and that’s why they said, “Of course we can.”

We can take it. Jesus is so gentle with his disciples. He understood that everything he was telling them about his imminent end and the coming kingdom was way beyond their sphere of reference and understanding. Instead of taking them to task, Jesus gently lets them down by saying, "You will indeed drink from my cup." You will indeed experience humility and lowliness and servitude to others, "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." In my spiritual kingdom, I will have people sitting at my right and my left, that is true. But those people are going to be the ones who achieved greatness in a very upside-down sort of way. God alone places people into those positions of servitude.

Now when the other ten disciples heard about this, they were upset. They thought James and John were trying to get the inside track on positions number one and two. So Jesus called them together and explained to them that the kingdom that they were going to be a part of had nothing to do with earthly greatness. God's kingdom is an upside-down one: The world is all about bossing people around, but that's not how it's going to be with you, Jesus said. "Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first, must be your slave." That's upside down! Slavery and servitude – that's greatness, Jesus said.

And then Jesus describes himself as the number one slave in the world: "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 didn't come to this planet to tell people what to do. He came to serve, to place himself underneath everybody. And he did that when he gave his life as a ransom for many.

Do you like God's upside-down approach to greatness? Are you someone who wants to place yourself at the service of other people? "What is it that you need? Let me get that for you." Is that you? We might have our moments when we do that sort of thing, but what is our natural tendency? What do we prefer? Don't we really prefer to be the one that is being served, telling everyone else what to do? "Bring that food to me. Wait, take it back, I don't like it. Someone else should clean up after me." Is this how we are at home? Maybe even a little bit at church? Do we sometimes really prefer to have someone else do things for us?

That's our pride talking, but isn't it comforting to know that we have a God who says to us, and even though I'm God, I'm going to show you true greatness and serve you. Our God is an upside-down God who, by grace, came to show us the way to heaven through humility and service. And today, Jesus invites us to pursue greatness his way. If you want to be great, Jesus says, then be someone's servant. Put yourself below someone else. Tie a child's shoe – that's greatness. Serve the people living in your home, church and community, there are all kinds of ways. Give of your time, talents and resources for the good of others. That's what this whole idea of stewardship is about, understanding what wonders God has done for us and continues to do and responding to it as we see fit. Be like Christ that way. It might not look very "great" in the eyes of the world, but who cares what the world thinks. Be a servant, a humble, lowly, kind, and gentle servant to others, just as Christ has been to you. Then you will be *great* in the eyes of God. Amen.