

## Matthew 20:17-28 “Life Is Great!” Lent 4 March 26, 2017

By Pastor Kenneth Mellon, Trinity Lutheran Church and School, Pleasant Valley Rd., West Bend, WI

God’s undeserved love and peace are ours through the humble work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Matthew 20:17-28 is the basis for our sermon. We read it in Jesus’ name.

These words call us to trust in You. Help us to believe and serve as Jesus has served us through Your truth.

Dear fellow servants, who are great in Christ,

What do people consider greatness? Would you consider yourself great if you were part of a team that won a stunning victory, like the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team? Would you consider yourself great if you were a soldier that helped win a decisive battle that turned the tide of a war? Do you measure greatness in important positions you hold or held in life? Perhaps some of you who are younger dream of using your talents in ways that cause people to stand and applaud you! Perhaps some dream of being positively changing the lives of many people, by inventing something or finding a new medicine saves lives.

We should be open to God’s will that He may use us to be a blessing to others. He used Joseph in Egypt to save 1,000’s of people from a famine. He used Esther as a queen to save her people from being killed. But, even if God doesn’t have a monumental task for us in life, we can still be sure that He has great things in mind for us. Christ has great things for us now in life and in heaven. We can say with confidence:

### Life is great!

**First, we are important to God!** God was so concerned about our lives that He sent His Son for us! Out of love for us, the Son of God became one of us! As such a great person, Jesus could have demanded the best of provisions wherever He traveled. No earthly palace would have been worthy enough for Him stay at. Yet as He traveled, He didn’t get angry even when people denied Him entrance to their cities or homes. He knew what to expect during His humble life. Isaiah wrote, “*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows....*” (Isaiah 53:3) Paul wrote about Him: “[Christ] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.... He humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:7-8) As the perfect man He should have entered heaven. Instead, to save us, He was about to enter worst suffering for any human. He told the disciples, “*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.*” (Matthew 20:18-19)

Jesus said in our verses, “*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*” (v.28) Does that sound like greatness to you? Yet, His sacrifice was stuff of greatness! Jesus’ death was a stunning victory far beyond all victories in sport or wars or anything else. His humble death on the cross defeated the devil with his accusing power because Jesus paid to forgive all sins, including every one of our sins! When our conscience bothers us or when our sins burden us, especially our sins that shame us and have sad consequences, Jesus’ sacrifice becomes so great! There are times in my life when I ask God how He could ever allow me to be His child, let alone to serve Him as a pastor. His answer is always the same. “*It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast.*” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Earlier we confessed our faith with joy in the saving work of Christ our Savior using Luther’s words, “He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.” In our verses, Jesus referred to the “cup” of suffering that He was going to fully drink on our behalf. (v.22) He didn’t do it because our lives were so great or because we were so influential or that we so important to the world. He gave His life for us out of pure love.

Because of that love, our life is great! It doesn't mean life is easy. It doesn't mean that the world and devil will no longer bother us. Even our own conscience will not let us rest. But by faith we will let God have the final say: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* (1 John 1:9) The Bible states, *"There is ... one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all."* (1 Timothy 2:5, 6) We all deserved judgment and death. But Christ swallowed them up in the victory by His death. His victory for us cannot compare to the greatest victory in sports or the greatest victory in war, or the greatest honor the world can give people! By His death, Christ defeated the devil. He can no longer accuse us for we are the forgiven children of God! We read in our verses that Salome wanted her two sons to have worldly positions of honor with Jesus in an earthly kingdom. How far short her understanding of what Jesus was preparing for them! Jesus Himself will praise all believers on Judgment Day before the whole world! And we will rule with Him forever!

**Second, how does this good news affect our lives?** It doesn't guarantee that we'll win a person of the year award from Time magazine. It doesn't guarantee that our life will get easier here. Truly, just the opposite will often happen just as Jesus told James and John: In time *"they would drink from His cup"* of suffering. James was martyred by King Herod. John was exiled on an island for preaching about Christ!

Also, Jesus wanted all His disciples and us to think God's way instead of letting our sinful selfish desires control us. He said, *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it 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."* (v.25-27) Jesus spoke this in response to ten disciples who were angry with James and John. They no doubt thought that they were just as worthy of those places of honor! They gave up much in life to follow Jesus. They were just as selfish for glory and they were jealous of them!

So, we must watch out, too. As much as we know what great honor Jesus won for us in heaven, we must fight the same sinful motives of the disciples. Too often our pious requests are really just masks for selfishness. God's wants, God's will, God's way, should be our highest priority! We should be daily pray and search the Bible so that we better understand how we can honor God and serve people with the good news and the love of Christ! If we want to be great, then let's put ourselves at God's disposal to serve as He directs us. He wants all people to share in Christ's glory! Remember how Luther described our life after relating what Christ did? *"All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness! Can life get any greater than that?"*

Through Jesus' death and resurrection, He provided everything that His followers needed. He forgave all the sins including anger and jealousy and provided peace for their hearts and joy in their lives. He gave them a purpose, not to sit on thrones, but to serve in His kingdom on earth until they joined Him in heaven. As Christians, we share in that same greatness of service. And as we serve others, we don't need to worry about who will notice and what they'll say. We already have God's blessing of eternal life by the saving work of Christ! So, we say with confidence in Christ: Life is great! Amen.