

“From the Least to the Greatest”

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Based upon Luke 22:24-26; Matt. 25:31-46

A couple of weeks ago I was blessed to be able to attend the newest production of *The King and I* at the Kennedy Center. The last time I saw that show was when I was in sixth grade. So, it's been quite a while. In case you also haven't seen it for a while, or have never seen it, let me remind you that the musical is about what happens when a strong-willed English widow named Anna moves to the Kingdom of Siam in 1862, to teach its strong-willed king's children. One of the funniest scenes in the show is when Anna and the king make a deal that her head will never be higher than his, in return for him giving her a house. Up until this point in the show, people of all ages had been dropping to their knees and bowing their faces to the ground with great pomp and circumstance to show obeisance to the king, but Anna had not. So once they make a deal, the king tests her by changing his physical position. He moves lower and lower, from standing to sitting to reclining, forcing her to do the same until she ends up lying face down on the ground. Even later on, when the king is on his death bed and Anna comes to visit, his first words to her are “Why is your head higher than mine?” Such a fragile ego! He was not content to be remembered as great for his relatively progressive policies at the time. Greatness to him meant being seen as superior, having power over others, and being adored by the “little people” around him.

The disciples in today's lesson from *Luke* wanted that kind of greatness too. They knew that Jesus was the Messiah, God's chosen King, and that therefore the very top spot in God's hierarchy was not theirs to claim. But they still wanted the next best spot, and probably would not have turned away a little trophy which said, “World's Greatest Disciple,” if Jesus had presented one of them with one at the Last Supper. According to *Luke*, it was Jesus' farewell meal which prompted their discussion. Jesus had just announced that one of them was going to betray him. So, I suppose after thinking for a minute that whoever would do that would be the worst disciple ever, they then started wondering who would be regarded as the best. In the other gospels, either James and John Zebedee start the argument, or worse yet, their mother, acting like the ultimate stage mom. In *Luke*, no individual disciple is singled out for being more ambitious or vain than the others. But in all of the gospels the conversation erupts at some point in the context of Jesus' parting instructions in the Passion narrative. So while Jesus is talking about his impending betrayal, suffering, and death, the disciples are talking about what they will get out of it either in this life or the next.

Knowing, as we do, that Jesus was about to die a horrific death for them, the disciples' argument seems unbelievably petty, self-absorbed, and dense. But their reaction was hardly out of the ordinary. From the beginning of time, whether out of great ambition or low self-esteem or some combination of the two, human beings have been fighting against each other for the spotlight. Those who are close to people in power typically want to be next in line to inherit it. Children want to believe that they were the favorite when a parent dies. And people of faith often want the assurance that they are more beloved to God than others. Although God never said that life was a competition, we make it that way most of the time. So before Jesus disappeared, it's

only natural that the disciples wanted to know how they were going to be graded by God and remembered on earth.

Think for a minute about how you measure greatness. For some of us greatness is measured in terms of power. For others, it is measured in terms of wealth, athletic ability, intellectual ability, fame, or authority. So we don't always agree on who is the greatest. For example, when Jesus was born the Herod in charge was called "Herod the Great," but history reveals that none of the Jews agreed with his assessment of himself. The same is true for the dozens of other political figures and monarchs who have called themselves great throughout history. Some people, or perhaps only they themselves, may have thought they were great, but not everyone. Similarly, you and I may disagree about who was the greatest baseball player of all time, Babe Ruth or Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, or Cal Ripken. We may disagree about whether the greatest musician of all time was Bach or Beethoven, Frank Sinatra or Elvis, Bono, or Kurt Cobain. But notwithstanding the diversity of our choice, our basic standards for greatness are still probably remarkably similar. People we perceive to be great typically are visibly and demonstrably the best of the best. Whether we measure that by fame, power, or comparative statistics, the greatest of the great always stand out from the rest.

Jesus did not measure greatness this way, however. So he wanted to make sure, before he left his disciples to carry on his ministry, that they understood the metrics he used. In order to do that, instead of just telling them there would be no trophies handed out that night, he set them up for a little "ah-ha" moment of learning. "Look," he said, "You know how the Gentile lords of the world use their power to control others, and how people call them 'Benefactors' whether they actually do good for others or not?" "Yes, yes," the disciples were thinking. *"We're so much better than they are, so think of how much power and praise we will get!"* "And you know how at a dinner party the host is so much greater than the servants?" "Yes of course," they said, thinking, *"and we are the host's best friends!"* Then Jesus dropped the bomb. "Well know this now: I am among you as one who serves." *"Wait what?"* they must have thought. *"That's not greatness..... Oh."*

This passage always makes me think of an old Jewish joke. One night a rabbi came into the synagogue. He lay down prostrate on the floor and said, "O God, I am nothing before you." While he was doing that, the cantor walked by. Seeing the rabbi, he too lay down on the floor and cried out, "O God, I am nothing before you." Then the custodian came in. He too lay down and said to God, "O God, I am nothing," at which point the rabbi whispered to the cantor, "Look who thinks he is nothing!"¹ You don't have to be Jewish to get the point. The first two, who had the highest status in their congregation, were making a show of humility without believing it. So they didn't want to be associated with the custodian, whom they actually did see as nothing. You could easily apply this joke to a Christian setting because even among people of faith, there is often an unspoken ranking in congregations and between congregations. We may feign humility, but in the secret shadows of our hearts, many of us not only crave God's praise, we also believe that we deserve it more than others, and that prideful belief leads us to judge others.

¹ See Hall of Famous Jokes, "Humility", at <http://www.realnothings.com/famous%20jokes/nothingjoke.htm>

When God judges, however, as we see in the story from *Matthew* today, our assessments of ourselves or others aren't worth much, if anything. The premise of the story is simple and familiar. In the End Times the Son of Man will separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be rewarded, and the goats will be cast out. The message of the lesson is that you want to be a sheep not a goat, right? But in this story, only God can tell the difference between the two. They cannot. This tells us that the judging is not based upon what the sheep and goats think of themselves or each other. No one here is providing resumes or recommendations, and if they were saying, "What's he doing here?" while waiting in line before the king, the story doesn't tell us that. All it tells us is that the Son of Man, who we know is Jesus, alone is able to do the sorting. He does this by separating those who cared for the people he calls "the least of these"—the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and in prison—from the people who did not.

Notice that none of "the least of these" in this story is judged. The Son of Man doesn't kick out the ones who ended up in prison, or the ones who were naked because they lost their shirts making bad decisions. He doesn't tell the sick they should have lived healthier lives or the hungry and thirsty that they should have gotten jobs. Earlier in *Matthew*, Jesus already pronounced judgment on the least when he said in his Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, and meek, and mourning, and hungry and thirsty for righteousness, and persecuted." So all the judging in the parable focuses on all the people who by definition are not "least." To them, Jesus says, "If you took care me you are a sheep. If you didn't, you're a goat."

Do you remember what they said? All of them said, "We don't remember taking care of you, Lord! When did we even see you?" Neither the sheep nor the goats recognized Jesus, so they didn't do what they did with ulterior motives. Some cared for the least and some didn't, but they did not realize that their behavior had anything to do with Jesus. "Well guess what? It does," Jesus told them. "The way I assess your love for me is by viewing how you treat the least among you. The measure of your greatness before God is how well you serve others."

Matthew was the only gospel writer who included this story in his gospel. It's part of a whole section on how to tell great disciples from poor ones—by how they trim their lamps, keeping their faith strong, by how they use their talents to profit God's kingdom, and by how they care for "the least." Matthew included these stories because his whole gospel is focused on what it means to follow Jesus. Other gospels focus more on who Jesus was, whom he loved, or what his resurrection meant for the world. But for Matthew, knowing Christ and being a disciple go together. When he wrote his gospel, the End Times had not come as people expected they would. So some were asking what the point of following Jesus was. Matthew's answer, spread out over his gospel, is that we should follow Jesus because he is the King, God's chosen Messiah, and we should do as he did because even though we were saved by God's grace in Christ, how we live still matters to God. There is no cheap grace. If we truly love God in Christ, we will care for each other. If we aspire to greatness at all, therefore, we should aspire to be great at being humble servants. For it is not how we stand out that matters to God, but how we serve.

In the middle of a wonderful poem called "*Sideways is the New Up*," poet Rick Fry expresses this idea this way:

The crucified one was exulted
and glorified in heaven.
Yet heaven is where God is,
and God is where our neighbor is,
and our neighbor is behind us and in front,
to the left, right, diagonal, and sideways.
So sideways is the new up.
We discover your glorified presence
in the thickness of life around us.
And you trust us to carry on the mission that you began,
with a promise that we will be
clothed with power from on high.
It's a power that we possess only by giving it away
for the sake of our sister and brother—²

If we want to move up the ranks, if we want to get closer to the greatness of God, then we must get closer to our neighbors on earth because Christ revealed that the ladder of success isn't really a ladder at all. It's much more like a lifeline. The measure of our greatness as disciples lies in how many we can connect to that lifeline by leading them into community, empowering them with love, and comforting them with the help of God's grace.

Now we must be careful with lessons like these, not to allow our old bad habits to repackaging them and turn them into a new way to compete and judge each other. The point isn't to make our lives into a "how low can you go contest" where lowness is the measure of our greatness, nor to encourage us to tally up the number of "least" people we help as if they were frequent flier miles that will get us into heaven. The real point that Christ was trying to make is that greatness is neither the be all and end all that we should desire, nor what we are called to seek as his disciples. We are called to serve as Christ served, knowing that life is not a competition, so how many trophies we have or accolades doesn't matter. What matters is that we love and help others as Jesus did. No one on earth may ever know exactly how many we do, least of all we, ourselves. But God knows, and in the end, no one else's opinion matters. Thanks be to God! Amen.

² Fry, Rick *Sideways in The New Up*, poem posted May 9, 2013, retrieved Aug. 21, 2017 from <https://rickfry130.wordpress.com/2013/05/09/sideways-is-the-new-up>