

February 17, 2016  
Luke 22:14-38

Midweek Lent 1  
The Upper Room: A Place of Service

*Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Lenten King. Amen.*

The artist Rembrandt tried to paint the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Twice! Twice he tried to help others see what faith looks like in that moment.

The first time in 1635, Rembrandt made a grand painting. This was early in his life. Rembrandt was famous. He had recently moved to Amsterdam. His halls were filled with students and his studio was filled with clients. His painting was over six feet tall and four feet wide. His vision was grand. As you look at the painting, you are struck by the faith of Abraham. Isaac is stretched out on the ground, his chest bared toward heaven, his back arched as his father's hand covers his face, pushing his head back to bare his throat. Rembrandt has painted a hero of faith (after all Abraham appears in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11), larger than life. Abraham's faith and Rembrandt's glory are blended into one.

Twenty years later, however, Rembrandt returned to this story a different man. He came as an artist who was broke and as a man who was broken. His wife had died, along with three of his four children. His family life was in ruins and, in less than a year, he would declare bankruptcy. Broke and broken, his picture of faith was much different. This time, the picture was small. An etching, about six inches by five inches. And, as you look at the etching, Abraham's boldness in following God is hidden. All you see is his love for the child. Isaac is kneeling alongside Abraham, his head on his father's knee. And Abraham covers Isaac's eyes, hiding him from his death, as if this were his father's last and greatest blessing. Rembrandt no longer paints a hero of faith, larger than life. Instead, he draws a small picture: a servant of Yahweh whose service is humble and hidden in love for his son.

This shows two ways of seeing faith, then: (1) faith mixed with glory, bold and larger than life or (2) faith, small and weak, humble and hidden in love for the least. I open with this contrast because, in some ways, it captures what is going on in our text this evening.

Tonight, we are in the Upper Room. Jesus celebrate the Passover with His disciples and then He bids them farewell. In this one small moment between Jesus and His disciples, we see two visions of faith: (1) faith mixed with glory, bold and larger than life, and (2) faith, small and humble, hidden in love for the least.

The disciples reveal faith mixed with glory, bold and larger than life. Luke tells us that *"a dispute arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest."* While Jesus is predicting His death, they are arguing about greatness. Having spent three years with Jesus, listening to His teachings and seeing Him cast out demons and rule over creation, the disciples now turn their eyes toward one another to see whose life is filled with glory. "Who is the greatest?" they ask. As Jesus moves toward death, His disciples grasp for life. As Jesus

welcomes dishonor, His disciples fight over honor. As Jesus speaks about suffering, His disciples argue about glory. **They try to rise above the world and rule!** Now, Luke doesn't give any specifics of their argument. We don't know what they said...but then again, do we really need the words? **We know what it sounds like, don't we?** Arguments over greatness. **Such arguments tend to be common among God's people, then and now.**

Whether you look at the Church at large or at an individual congregation such as our own, it is not hard to come across division and strife. God's people are frequently broken up in arguments about gifts and greatness. It happened in Corinth. Here you had a church blessed with a multitude of gifts: faith and healing and miraculous powers that could make you stand up on your feet and sing. And in such a place, was there peace? No! God's people were too busy arguing about all of the gifts, trying to see which was the greatest. God's church became divided, as people fought over God's blessings. Some followed Paul, others Apollos, others Peter. The very pastor that God has given them became tools that Satan used to divide them. Satan wants to turn us against one another, and he uses God's gifts to do it. **He tries to turn our gifts into things that cause us to fight.** Our confessions of faith, our offerings to God, our service to the church, our witness to the world become ways in which we divide ourselves into groups, and even our people that sit in the pews. Into those who are really committed and those who are not. He gives us visions of faith, mixed with glory. Bold and larger than life. Slowly, our gifts begin to separate us as Satan uses the good things of God to divide.

And the tragedy of all this is not the wasted time, not the wasted gifts, not the hurt feelings, and the words said in anger. **The real tragedy of all this is that we end up missing the very thing that God wants us to see: His presence in this place, His work of loving service.** We find ourselves busy with all the trappings of disagreement, when right in our midst God is doing one thing that brings about agreement, the one thing that can make all of us stand on our feet and sing, the one work that is greater than any that anyone here has ever known: the humble work of His saving service.

In Jesus, we have the true picture of greatness. Notice how Jesus responds to His disciples' argument. Once before, His disciples had argued about greatness. When that happened, Jesus took a child and placed that child in their midst. Luke records in chapter 9: *<sup>46</sup> An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. <sup>47</sup> But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side <sup>48</sup> and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great."*<sup>1</sup> Children, remember, had a little to no social status at that time. Yet Jesus interrupted His disciples' grand and glorious visions by asking them to look at a child. That child, easily overlooked and easily forgotten, was, to Jesus, a little picture of faith. Like Rembrandt's Abraham, holding his son, Jesus held a child and revealed the hidden nature of God's glory. **God's glory is a life of embracing, receiving, serving the one who is least in the Kingdom.**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Lk 9:46–48). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Now, however, Jesus does more. Rather than place a child in their midst, Jesus claims his disciples as children. When His disciples argue over greatness, Jesus reveals faith in humble service. He asks His disciples a question: *“Who is the greater, one who reclines at the table or one who services?”* The disciples would have agreed that Jesus was greatest among them, that He was the one who should recline at table, but Jesus calls their attention to His action. He is the one who serves. Not only has He served them at the table, but He is going to serve them as He suffers betrayal and dies on the cross. The Creator comes to die for His creatures. Here, hidden in this service, is the greatness of God.

Jesus radically identifies with that which is least in this world, become the Crucified One, rejected by the world, by religious leaders, by His disciples, even by His Heavenly Father, and yet in that rejection, He fiercely and faithfully holds on to every last sinner, every last fallen child of God. In His dying, Jesus silences all arguments by revealing the radical mercy of God. Through His death, the least are brought into the kingdom of God. As we struggle for glory and seek to make a name for ourselves, Jesus freely gives us the only name that truly matter. You are a child of God, forgiven of sin, and hidden in the embrace of God. God the Father extends His hand over you and gives you His greatness and blessing. He hides you from eternal death by the death of Jesus, His Son. God now calls you His son, His daughter.

As children of God, we don't know the future. We don't know the struggles that it might bring. But Jesus wants you to know the comfort of His service for you for all time. Although one will betray Him, another denies Him. Satan divides them, and the worlds fights against them; although, we, too, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; although all of this is true, there is one who comes among us and brings us the true glory of God. Jesus reveals God's glory in suffering service. He comes to fulfill all that God has planned. He goes to the cross and offers His life that He might come this evening and offer forgiveness to you. You are children of God. In Jesus, God has brought you into a Kingdom that death, the devil, and all of our petty arguments can never destroy. This world of arguments about greatness has become a place of great service in Him. In Jesus Name. Amen.

*Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior, our Lenten King. Amen.*