

Sermon for September 19th 2021
Year B - 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Summary: Servanthood is about making a sacrifice on behalf of others, not for material gain. In the Christian context, it is always about making certain that there is room enough for all, and a place for everyone.

And they argued with one another as to who would be the greatest.

Are we really surprised by that? Many of us have probably been part of such debates. Whether personally we were Mom or Dad's favorites, the best speller in the class, the fastest sprinter on the track team, the best debater, or in the broader context, who is the best author, best band, greatest composer, most powerful movie, and everything in between, "greatness" is very much a matter we live with, day in and day out. Indeed, it is one of the primary questions constantly at the heart of many of our conflicts, anxieties, and insecurities. Whether we ask it out loud or search silently within, we constantly want to know who, or what, is the greatest.

There are some deep issues at work here, my friends. Particularly, I think the debate about greatness is often about the matters of SPACE and PLACE. Does my opinion matter to others in this debate? Is there room for me in this conversation? Is there a place for me in my family? In this church? In my profession? Is there a place for my religious beliefs, my political opinions, my race and creed, my lifestyle, in this society and in this culture? Is there a place for my people, my tradition, and my history? Is there room here for me?

Furthermore, the world teaches us that, as individuals and groups, we have to fight to establish our place in the world. It's the "survival of the fittest", which is another way of saying "survival of the greatest". If we want to succeed, we have to be place-makers. Historically, the ones who have been the most successful in carving out their places are called "the greatest". Their sacrifices have usually translated into wealth and power, attributes the world believes points to greatness.

How does the world see greatness? Watch the news, check the twitter feed, follow the Fortune 500, study the latest advertising campaigns created by Madison Avenue. Position, possessions, influence, popularity, attractiveness, and athletic ability are all considered assets when making a place for our selves. In the history of our own nation, it has also has not hurt if one happened to be male, light skinned, and born and raised into certain communities.

You know, I suppose that there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these attributes, until there is: Until we use them to occupy a place to the exclusion of another, until we turn our gaze inward and no longer see ALL of our neighbors, until we, and not the God we profess, are the center of our life and the world. Then, we begin to turn toward discrimination and to violence to hold our place in the world. Those who we think might trespass upon our greatness, take our place, invade our space, well, in fear, we turn on them and in the process become needy, defensive, and anxious. Where is the grace of God, and where is the love of God, in that approach to life?

These conflicts in our lives, and in the world around us, reveal the fact that, by nature, we care deeply, sometimes fearfully, about our place in the world as we wonder whether we too are amongst the greatest. But do you and I realize this morning, as followers of Jesus Christ, that it has never been the case that we create our own place in this world? In fact, it's just the opposite. We only discover our place in this world when we seek to create a space for others in the name of Christ, particularly those who have already been pushed to the margins. That's what Jesus did. That is the lesson that he sharing with his disciples in today's Gospel.

Christ has come into the world to be a place maker, but in an entirely different way. He has entered the world not seeking a place of honor for himself, but rather creating a space for each one of us in the kingdom of his Father. Christ's way of creating place and space for all is signified in the message of the cross. This is what Jesus means when he says to us that to be the greatest of all is to be the last of all and the servant of all. It is also why he says, if you really want to be my disciple, you must pick up your own cross and follow me.

And that's why he takes that little child into his arms. In response to the disciples roadside debate, he is saying that caring for this infant is what place making is really all about. And lest we miss his point, this is NOT about the innocence, purity, and sweetness that we moderns tend to associate with babies. In Jesus' day, children were insignificant, to be hardly seen and certainly not heard, at the very bottom of the social and economic structure. They were the powerless and poor, too often found amongst the hungry and the sick. Their value was next to nothing unless and until they were old enough to work, thereby bringing honor to the family and care for their aging parents. This child in Jesus' arms is the exact opposite of greatness in the estimation of the society of Jesus' day. And that is exactly the point of this story.

Jesus is creating a place for this child, who represents the very least of the least. And he invites us, as his followers, to do the same. In the Kingdom of Heaven, Greatness is about choosing to be last of all and servant of all. Jesus did not come to achieve greatness for himself. He came to make a place in this world for all God's children everywhere. The only place he really ever cared about was a place for all of us in very love of his Father.

The truth this morning is this: We are all investing our lives in place making. There's just one question: Are we primarily working to make a place for ourselves? Or are we using our lives, and our love, to create space for others as Jesus has done for us? You know, we always have a choice. Amen.