

“Redefining Greatness”
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Isaiah 9:2-7; Acts 17:1-9;
Matthew 20:20-28; John 13:1-17

It's shocking! Shocking to hear that there's another king. Isn't that what's going on in Acts? People are saying that there's a new king who is going to cause problems with Caesar. There's another king.

For us, I don't know that we get too excited about the idea of a king at all. We don't really like kings any more. So how do we translate this? How is it shocking for us to think about whether there is a new king? We will have to think a little bit about what a king is. What do we think about in terms of a king? It's hard enough for us to think about, but where do we give our loyalty? Where is our loyalty given? What are the things we really hold dear and give our loyalty to?

Today it's a little harder to think about it being some governing structure. I think today we more often think about it in other terms. Perhaps it's what we use to guide our lives. What is the thing that shapes who we are? Our loyalty is to that thing. It can be something like “I need to be myself.” That can be my king; that idea shapes who I am. I need to be myself, have my identity. Or I can have it be shaped by the sense of my business or what I do. I'm a student or a professor. Is there a difference between Vandals and Cougars? It's the idea of what do I give my allegiance to, what group? How do I shape my life? What reflects who we are? Is there some thing that does that for us? In some ways, that's the idea that a king is defined by what you give loyalty to.

When I think about a king, it's the idea of crown and robe, a throne. When I think of a king, I think of a king sitting up on a throne. We have those images. But what about the idea of Christ as king? It's not that you never want to think about Christ as king in that grand fashion, and yet there aren't a whole lot of times that Christ takes on that mantle. He doesn't come and throw Herod off the throne and sit down and start giving orders. It's almost as if we come into Christ's kingdom and when we find the throne, it's empty because he's out among his people. That's what's so shocking about the foot washing. We would never expect a king to do that kind of thing.

There's a story that I heard somewhere. The idea is that we're in this kingdom, and in this kingdom the king sits up on a big throne up on a raised platform. The rule is that nobody in the kingdom is ever supposed to be higher than the king. So when the king sits on his throne, he is sitting high so the people don't have to be bent over all the time. But it happened that a young lad was able to save the king's life, and now that lad is coming to court. So the lad comes down and bows before the king, but the king does something unusual. The king gets up, comes down, has the lad stand up and he gets down on his knee and bows to that lad. Now, what happens in the court? Everybody's head is supposed to be lower than the king, so if the king is bowing down, everybody else has to bow down even lower.

That's a little bit like what it feels like when Jesus gets down and starts washing people's feet. It's like at that moment everybody else wants to get down even lower. There's a couple of things about that. One, if you're the person whose feet are being washed, everybody else is bowing down. There's this sense of lifting you up and giving you some sense of the value you have as a subject of the king. The second thing is, it's incredible how the idea of servanthood is acted out by that king. Jesus is saying, "Now do this to one another." It's an incredible thing.

There's a problem with that, however, in today's world. It's not just the idea of giving loyalty to another, but this idea of being a servant. Jesus is saying if you are a servant, that's the way to be great. But in today's society, it feels to me like to be great is to be famous. We are bumping up against that contradiction between where Jesus leads us and where society might tell us to go. If we really follow Jesus and we hear that call to servanthood, perhaps nobody will ever know who we are. Who are the people in our lives that we hardly pay any attention to? I think it is the people who serve us, oftentimes. The people who bring us our meals at a restaurant or check us out at a store. Or if you go to the motel, you never even see the servants there. They clean your room and you never even see them. (Although you might pass them in the hallway in the morning.) Servants can be invisible, yet Jesus is calling us into a place of servanthood. He's redefining greatness. He's inviting us to wash each other's feet.

I should say something about washing other's feet because it doesn't really make any sense to me. It's not something we do at all. But if you were in Palestine and if you were walking down those dirty paths all the time, coming into someone's home it would be really nice to be able to wash your feet. That was part of it, but there was a little bit more than that. There was some belief back then, as I understand it, that you could actually pick up the sin of others on your feet. So it wasn't like you were just getting a little dust on your feet, you were somehow contaminating yourself with sin. So washing the feet was to try to get rid of that sin, becoming clean of not just the dirt, but the sin around you. So perhaps Jesus was foreshadowing something by washing their feet.

But if he was inviting us to wash each other's feet and to be servants in that way, perhaps he was inviting us to help cleanse each other of sin. Perhaps it was a way to engage us with each other in a way to help us so that we don't sin, or that when we have sin there's some absolution, a way of forgiveness, a way of being washed clean. It is in that very act of servanthood he's inviting us to live.

We have some people who are going through Stephen Ministry training right now, and they recognize that there is something that oftentimes happens between people in a confidential situation who are just listening to one another. We never know exactly what's happening. It's a service that occurs, but who knows it's even happening? God probably does. And yet the value to the care receiver, when somebody is listening to them, is incredible. Little acts. But Jesus says, "You know what it's like for the great people among you, the tyrants and leaders among you. They lord it over you, but you will care for one another and be servants." It's not an easy thing to do.

I had a person telling me a while back that they had a woman they were working with who they didn't feel was living up to the job description. She wasn't doing the work that needed to be done. The person was really frustrated with her and didn't understand why the boss didn't just get rid of her. Then a couple of months later the person found out that she was in the midst of a time of domestic violence and abuse. Her boss was actually helping her through a very difficult time, showing some grace. How often is it that we can look at the form and function of what we want from somebody and forget to care for them, to serve them?

What does it mean that our king bows down and serves? He doesn't sit in a chair somewhere giving orders, but walks among his people healing them, teaching them, loving them. It is as we follow him, as he becomes our model of service and grace that the kingdom of heaven can come and God's will can be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.