Sunday August 3, 1980

Book 9

"TRUE GREATNESS" Luke 22:14-27

In the story of the first Communion service according to the Gospel of Luke, an unusual incident is reported. To begin with, Luke tells us that Jesus had especially looked forward to this final meal with his closest followers for two reasons, First, he knew he would be his last meal with them before his trial and death; and second, it was the meal of the Jewish Passover, one of the most important religious observances for all Jews.

During the meal, Jesus took the wine and the bread and divided it among his disciples and told them how the bread and wine represented his body which would soon be broken and his blood which would be shed for them and all people.

Then Luke reports this incredible conversation--In Luke's own words, "A dispute arose among the disciples, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest." Think of it, Jesus had just told them that this was his last meal with them and that later that night he would be arrested and on the next day would die on the cross. He also predicted that one of them would betray him that very night. And then just a few minutes later the disciples are found arguing among themselves as to which of them would be regarded as the greatest.

Had these disciples not remembered any of the teachings and example of their Master? They had been with him and heard him say over and over again--"If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Jesus had said over and over again that true greatness in God's eyes does not consist of what rank we attain in our society, or what power we had in the world, or how much our salary is, or how famous we are. God is not impressed with titles that are added to our name: His excellency, Her Majesty, The Honorable.

Nowhere in the Bible do we find Jesus saying, "Blessed are the people of power," or "blessed are the celebrities," or "Blessed are you when people want your autograph," or "blessed are you when you make the headlines in the society page."

Rather Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted for righeousness' sake."

So the first point is, true greatness according to God's standards is quite different from the world's standards. Thus Jesus told his disciples that night of the last supper, when he heard them arguing about who among them was to be regarded as the greatest--"let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves."

True greatness is not to be found in fame, or headlines, or power, or wealth. God wants to know only, "How did you treat other people?" The way you treat people is the way you treat God. God wants to know especially--"How did you treat the down and out, those who are poor, those who need help, those in prison, those who are sick, those who are hungry?"

Thus in God's way of judging greatness, some of the greatest people will always remain anonymous as far as the world is concerned. All of our common measurements of importance and greatness are rendered obsolete. The boasts of fame and the pomp of power are irrelevant as far as God is concerned. Jesus halts the whole human parade and puts it in reverse.

Suppose Jesus were to come to our community and pick out the leading citizens. Who would they be as measured by his standards? The majority of his candidates would be no-bodies by the world's standards.

2. Secondly, this dispute among the disciples about who was to be regarded as the greatest, reminds us that there are no "sanctified people." Even though the disciples had been with Jesus and were his closest companions, greed and selfishness were still with them, as they are with all of us.

The redeemed person as Martin Luther said, is redeemed from sin, but not from sinning. Confidence in life comes not through claiming goodness for ourselves, but in trusing in the renewing, forgiving grace of God.

No Christian decision or experience renders one immune from the temptations and confusions which are a part of the human condition. The fact that the disciples were personally with Jesus day in and day out did not grant them a life-long immunity from temptation and sin. Even in their final hours with Jesus, they fell back into their old worldly ways.

It happens to all of us. We can leave this Communion table this morning and quickly fall back into our old ways. We can make a promise or a commitment and then soon after forget all about it.

We should not be surprised by this, but rather humbled by it. The world is not divided into a two-level humanity, the saved and the damned, the righteous and the unrighteous, the saints and the sinners. We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Once we recognize this we can admit our failures and go on to true greatness. For true greatness begins in us when we realize that in God's eyes, those who are great are those who are willing to be the servants of all. Amen.