

I Am the Greatest

- I. The major text for last week was 1 Cor. 11, where we saw that the church was in turmoil because of division between the wealthy on one side and the poor on the other.
1. That division was demonstrated most visibly in the Lord's Supper, where one group was feasting and leaving the scraps for the poor.
- B. But to understand the 1 Corinthians text, we had to delve into the assembly style of the first century church.
1. We looked at the assembly described in Acts 20 of the church in Troas.
 2. We observed that the early church grew up in homes, not in meeting places like this.
 3. It is also universally agreed that the early church met for a meal, of which the Lord's Supper was a part.
 4. Therefore the unity aspect of the assembly was much more apparent than in a setting like this.
 5. In the First Century, the church members gathering in a home had a stronger face to face fellowship.
 6. As they ate their love feast together, they shared in one another's food and they sat side by side at the table in much closer communion than we experience today.
- C. I want to pick up that thought with two passages today.
- II. Luke's account of the Last Supper. (Luke 22:19-27 NRSV) *Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* ²⁰ *And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. ²¹ But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. ²² For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!"*
- ²³ *Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this. ²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.*
- A. Note first that Jesus said he was giving his body and pouring out his blood for his disciples.
1. What does that say about our remembrance of the Supper?
 2. In the context of Luke's gospel, Jesus is the example of a martyr — he lays down his life for others.
 3. (John 15:13 NRSV) *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*
 4. We have read from Phil 2, *And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*
 5. That is the picture of Jesus. A humble servant. Caring for others. Laying down his life for others.
 6. You would think that the disciples, watching him, walking with him, being his shadows for these 3 years, would have caught on by now.
 7. But look what follows.
- B. Jesus tells them that one of them is to betray him, so they begin to deny the possibility saying, "It's not me. I would never do that. I'm Jesus' finest student. I'd never do that."

“What do you mean you’re the finest student, I’m more faithful than you are.” “Oh yea, remember when you....”

1. No one bothers to ask, “Am I the one? Could it be me?” They all proclaim “I’m the greatest!”
 2. I wonder what the look was on Jesus’ face. Bewilderment maybe. Won’t these disciples ever grow up. Won’t they ever catch on.
 3. Here their master is dying for them, is setting the example of martyrdom for them, and they are busy claiming their rank in the pecking order of the kingdom.
 4. Even among the 12, there is no equality.
 5. Even at this table of the Lord, they squabble over the seats of honor and rank.
- C. Jesus rebukes them with an example. ²⁵ *But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶ But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.*
1. Jesus unmasks the all-too-human characteristics of those who follow him: infidelity or betrayal; and the struggle for power and esteem.
 2. Jesus recalls the mentality of pagan lords, because they are in power, and they want their power to be felt.
 3. The domineering spirit of pagan kings and overwhelming self-aggrandizement of all authority figures are well known.
 4. Others are benefactors, generously giving yet demanding generous glorification.
 5. But Jesus cuts to the chase: “this must not be the way with you.”
 6. Jesus asks the question: who is greater, the one who sits at the dinner table or the one who serves the dinner?
 - a) To his audience this is a rhetorical question. Everyone knows that the master, the head of the house, the one who is the greatest sits at the table while his wife or slaves, primarily female slaves, do the serving.
 - b) But Jesus does a role reversal. He says, he is the one serving. He is the waiter, He is the bus-boy
 - c) Kingdom greatness comes in serving.
- D. There is a sense in which our custom has done a flip/flop on this whole supper illustration.
1. We somehow have taken serving the Lord’s table not as humbling service, but as honor, even a source of pride and authority.
 2. I was corresponding with Ted Thomas who was familiar with mission work with native Koreans. He said the missionaries had a very difficult time there getting the men to serve to the Lord’s Supper. Korean men never served a meal. That was women’s work. It was a slam on their manhood to be asked to pass the cup and plate.
 - a) In the Korean setting, getting the men to be willing to serve the table was exactly what Luke 22 sought.
 3. We have made the table such a position of honor and authority that we will not allow a woman to serve, on the assumption that she is usurping authority. Leave the pot luck meals to her, but deny her the most sacred meal of all.

4. Brothers and sisters, I know these are very disturbing words to some of you, but put yourself in the first century house church setting, sitting around the table, sharing your food with others, praising God and rejoicing at your salvation. It is a table shared by Jew and Greek, master and slave, male and female sitting totally uncharacteristically side by side. It is a total scandal. Who do you think served the table? Where is the passage that says women are to serve in the kitchen but not at the table? Where is the passage that says this is an office or leadership.
 5. How does our observance of the Lord's Supper proclaim the unity and the oneness of this community of believers?
- E. When you read the other gospels, this "Who is the greatest" discussion takes place earlier in the ministry of Jesus. We forget sometimes that the gospel writers were not writing history or biography, but theology. They are presenting the thoughts of God in story fashion.
1. So why does Luke put this story here, at the supper?
 - a) Remember Luke is writing to the church at least 25 years after the incidents actually took place.
 - b) With Jesus gone, and some of the apostles dead, the church was already facing leadership struggles.
 - c) This passage presupposes a community with leaders who are overly impressed with their authority.
 - (1) (Luke 12:37 NRSV) *Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.* (A prelude to this text)
 - (2) (Luke 12:42 NRSV) *"Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves,*
 - d) All of us must remember who is in charge, and it is none of us. It's Jesus. All the rest of us are stewards, answerable to him and servants of one another.
 2. Luke also reminds us that one can sit at the table and eat the meal with Jesus, and still betray him. Gathering on Sunday and eating this supper is no guarantee against apostasy or in favor of purity. All sorts of folks eat this meal.
 3. What Jesus wants is people who are not only concerned for their vertical relationship to God, but with the horizontal relationships of the community. That is, people who have allowed the Spirit of Christ to abide in them to the extent that they act like him, not like the world.
 4. We do not approach the table to be served, but to serve one another.
- F. Our Luke passage closed with the words, *I am among you as one who serves.*
- III. John tells the story, and he puts it this way. (John 13:2-15 NRSV). *And during supper*³ *Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,*⁴ *got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.*⁵ *Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.*
- A. John says, during supper. During this meal. During his Last Supper, Jesus sets the example.
 - B. The washing of feet was the standard greeting in the ancient east, and the least desirable job for a slave.

- C. It was a word in which most roads were not paved, most people wore sandals if they wore shoes at all, and all travel was by walking. You did not go anywhere without getting your feet dirty.
1. And since you shared the paths with other humans and animals, and walked in all kinds of weather, there was no telling where you had walked and what dirt was on your feet.
 2. Feet became very callused, they were scathed by years of walk - they were poor sight.
- D. So when you entered a home as a guest, your feet were washed, either by yourself or by a servant of your host.
1. So we see examples in the Bible of those who wash feet.
 - a) Abigail in obeisance offers to wash David's feet.
 - b) Women on two occasions wash the feet of Jesus: one with tears, one with expensive perfume.
 - c) John the Baptist declares that he is not worthy to wash Jesus' feet.
 2. But here in the upper room, there are 12 men concerned for their rank in the kingdom. Evidently they all came in, looked around, then sat down with dirty feet, each too proud to serve the other.
 3. How, with the meal have eaten, Jesus, the master, stoops to wash the disciples feet.
 4. The text says he does it "to show the full extent of his love."
- E. Imagine the hush in the room. He washes one, then another, then another. It is silent. They look at each other, they look at him, their foreheads twist with questioning, then he comes to Peter. I wonder if Peter thought that he was the greatest.
1. *"Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"* Stupid question.
 2. ⁷ *Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."*
 3. ⁸ *"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."* Never?? Never is a long time.
 4. *Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."* Silence. Impetuous Peter is thinking, for once.
 5. ⁹ *"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"*
 6. ¹⁰ *Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."* ¹¹ *(For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.)* They had a bath before they came. Peter did not need a bath, but he needed to follow Jesus.
 7. ¹² *When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.* Again, I feel a thick silence that you can cut. It is not quiet, it is silent. The disciples are waiting in anticipation.
 8. *"Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.* ¹³ *"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.* ¹⁴ *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.* ¹⁵ *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.* ¹⁶ *I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.* ¹⁷ *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

- IV. On the surface, this text is a text about being served and serving one another. It is the opening of the marvelous teaching by Jesus in the upper room, his last thoughts before his death, and it is teaching about love and unity.
- A. As Jesus calls us to his table this morning, he calls us to love and unity. He calls us to humble service. He tells us that none of us is greater than another.
 - B. There are no exemptions for service. No exemptions for age, or education, or wealth, or handicaps.
 - C. There are no exemptions because service is an outgrowth of love. This was his demonstration of love. You can't love without serving.
- V. On another level, it is a text about forgiving.
- A. Jesus said, you don't need a bath, just a footwashing.
 - B. Every proper guest would have a bath before attending a special meal like this. They did not need to bathe all over again. But their feet had picked up some dust on the walk over, so their feet needed washing.
 - C. In a spiritual sense, the disciples had been washed. They had been with Jesus for three years, he has blessed them with his teaching and his spirit. They had been washed.
 - D. But today, as every day, they had picked up the dirt of walking in the world, and today, as every day, they needed that daily cleansing that Jesus provided. It wasn't a starting over from scratch, but a perfecting from this point on.
 - E. If that interpretation is correct, then there is for us the challenge to not only serve, but to continue his forgiveness. *"He who receives one whom I send, received me."*
- VI. We gather around the table as one body.
- A. There must be something unique about this group.
 1. We are not a high school crowd gathered in assembly.
 2. We are not movie goers sitting at the theatre.
 3. We are not assembled in an auditorium to hear a great performance.
 4. We are not a bunch of sports fans cheering on the Rockets.
 5. We are a family.
 - a) We are part of one another.
 - b) We are brothers and sisters.
 - c) We have a stake in every individual in the room.
 - d) There must be no anonymous faces.
 - e) The individuals on the prayer list are mother and father, brother and sister, son and daughter.
 - f) Their pains are my pains.
 - g) Their needs are for me to fill.
 - h) Their sin in my sin
 - i) Their forgiveness is mine to grant.
 - B. The Supper demands reconciliation, sharing and serving among all of us. It is a demonstration of human redemption. The emphasis on oneness.
 - C. It is a witness to the world of a united people, all sorts of folks sitting down and eating together. It brings together people who would not otherwise have anything in common.
 - D. Every time the congregation gathers, it acts out the essential features of how the world is supposed to be and it proclaims Jesus as central to that identity.
 - E. Jesus, during this supper, demonstrated his love and said, *"I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."*