

### **Luke 14:1, 7-14**

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

## **The Victory of the Last** - October 6, 2019

*Luke 14:1, 7-14*

What does it mean to be great? It's such a squishy word. I mean, we hear the word "great" all time in all kind of contexts. With football season upon us, we return to the debate as to whether Tom Brady is the greatest quarterback of all time. I guess in this case, "great" means best.

If you watch TV or listen to radio, you can hardly escape hearing an automobile advertisement claiming that this dealer or that automaker is having the "greatest" sale in its history. We could say that "great" in this case could mean most unusual or extraordinary.

Of course, I hardly need to mention that our president was elected on the slogan, "Make America Great Again." In this case great probably means "powerful, feared, or respected."

Greatness has many meanings. It is certainly something that people, organizations, and even nations claim to want to be. I suppose that at the root of it all is the assumption that a great anything is better than a not great anything. In other words, if someone or something is great, it is superior to everything else and that is good, I guess.

The problem with greatness and calling people or organizations great is that is highly subjective. It is very much a matter of opinion, or preference, or personal taste as to whether something is great or not. For example, there are many here who love cheese, cheese of all sorts. Some especially love blue cheese and before eating some, They'll heat it up in the microwave a little bit. Of course, during the heating process means you can smell the cheese, but many think the aroma is great.

Believe it or not, some people hate cheese of every variety. There are some who can't even stand cottage cheese!. So when nasty people heat up blue cheese in the microwave, they nearly gag. For them, cheese is not great, cheese is terrible.

Of course, greatness is subjective when it comes to people, too. At one point, men like Bill Cosby, Matt Lauer, and Jeffery Epstein were considered great at their professions. Their greatness was such that when they were accused of unspeakable crimes against women and children, they had many defenders come forward and deny that such things were impossible for such "great" people. Sadly, of course, we know it's painfully true. So much for greatness.

Clearly, a person can be considered great at a few things, but can be an absolute failure at others. On one level, people like Kim Jong-Un or Vladimir Putin can be considered great leaders because they are at the center of power of North Korea and Russia. Yet are they great human beings? Both men did and do whatever it takes to grab and hold onto power. Both have no problem exiling or

even killing their enemies. Both have little tolerance for those who disagree with them. Yet they are great.

We need a new understanding of greatness. And interestingly enough, or maybe not so interestingly, the place to start is in scripture. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the word “great” appears over 1000 times. Now to be sure, the word great is used in the way we often use it. For example, in Genesis Chapter 1, the creation story tells us that God made the “Greater Light” or the Sun, to rule the day and the “Lesser Light” or the Moon, to rule the night. We can read of references to “great people,” “great armies,” “great famine,” and, in the case of Goliath, “great stature.” All these are typical of how we understand the word great.

Yet, there is another way scripture comments on greatness, and it is not particularly favorable. In Psalm 33 the author comments on the limits of greatness: “A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine.” In short, as far as God is concerned, great armies, great strength, or great might do not have the power to save us. Instead of trusting that greatness, whatever that is, will save us, the Psalmist urges us to trust in the Lord to deliver us. Hmmm, greatness, or God?

Indeed, Psalm 136 reminds us that God “overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, led his people through the wilderness, and struck down great kings, because his steadfast love endures forever.” What is greatness of any kind compared to the love of God? Yes, greatness is also redefined in Proverbs 15 when we are reminded, “Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it.”

The prophet Zephaniah further reverses our understanding of greatness when he tells us, “The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. That [great] day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the Lord.” The so-called Great Day of the Lord will, in reality, be a terrible day for people because they sinned against the Lord. Greatness cuts both ways.

The Old Testament records the histories of Great Kings, like David, who despite his greatness, stole a man’s wife, raped her, and then sent him to the front lines of a battle to be killed. The great

King Solomon, whom we might remember because he chose wisdom instead of riches or power, governed the nation so badly that when he died, it split into two, Israel, and Judah.

We've talked before about how the great and mighty of Israel and Judah put on great and impressive worship services and made a great show of showing off their wealth in the temple. But the prophet Micah wrote in the Name of the Lord, "Should you not know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron. Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time because they have acted wickedly." Very graphic, yes, but also very true. Who can deny that what happened in Israel thousands of years ago is still happening today, even in this country? God determines greatness far differently than most of us do.

Hence, when it comes to God's understanding of greatness, who better to teach us about it than Jesus?

It is easy to forget, and sometimes I think we don't want to remember, that throughout his life, Jesus was a poor man. During his childhood, he lived in the remote village of Nazareth, working as some kind of tradesman. Although many versions of the Bible say Joseph was a carpenter, the actual Greek word is much more ambiguous.

Thus for all his life Jesus looked at life from the perspective of someone at the bottom of the ladder of life. His wisdom, teaching, and personality brought him to the attention of people at all levels of society, but even on the rare occasions when he got to sleep in a nice bed and eat good food, he didn't forget who he was or the people he associated with.

As far as Jesus was concerned, greatness was found in the daily unsung, uncelebrated acts of life. Jesus knew firsthand about widows and their struggles to feed their children and keep a roof over their heads. He knew of typical family life back then, where many generations lived under one roof. He knew what it was like to care for aging parents and the sometimes frustrating job of tending to their particular needs. At a time when half of all children failed to live to adulthood, he knew about the suffering and sorrow of parents watching their little ones fall ill and not always recover. He knew of men working ridiculous hours and doing dangerous things to help support their families. But for Jesus, these everyday acts of life and living, all of which we see today, were the marks of true greatness. These are the actions which he honors, these are the people he respects. This is what really matters in life.

I cannot help but think, therefore, that when Jesus was at the banquet that day, and saw people struggling to get to the best seats, that he was both amused and appalled. And he was amused and appalled for the same reason: he was looking upon people who had no clue as to what really mattered in life.

Isn't it laughable back then and today that some think that by wearing the right clothes, having the right hairdo, or smelling of the right perfume somehow makes you special? Isn't it laughable that respect is automatically given to those with titles next to their names, whether or not they truly deserve such titles. Isn't it amusing that we allow ourselves to be impressed by big houses, fancy chariots (or cars), and secluded vacation homes. Ahh, remember the old TV show, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous?" Today it's called "Keeping up with the Kardashians."

It is appalling that we give more respect and attention to the glitz and glitter of life than the people who are caring for parents suffering from Alzheimers. It is appalling that we pass out title of hero to a sports player who makes a big play, but ignore the parents working insane hours to afford medical care for their children. It is appalling that Hollywood stars can buy places at Yale and Stanford for their children, but the student trying to learn in a poor home environment has to eat tuna fish sandwiches because there's no lunch money.

Jesus made it clear: the host, and only the host, knows and decides who is worthy of the place of honor and who is not. Too often, the people of Jesus' day and the people of our day declare themselves to be the best, the hero, the greatest.

But Jesus Christ is for the so-called losers. The so-called losers are the people society ignores. The so-called losers are the people working as hard as they can for no recognition. The so-called losers are the ones who don't go the big parties, can't afford tickets to the Eagles, but are doing their best in a world where the odds seem stacked against them.

The host, you see, is God. And God urges us to invite and celebrate the so-called losers to the real banquet of life. God wants us to recognize the silent, vital, loving work that so many do, but never get credit for. In God's universe Victory in Life belongs not to the people in black tuxedos wearing diamonds, but to the so-called losers making life happen and continue day by day.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.