

Honor from the Father

Sunday, March 21, 2021

Fifth Sunday of Lent at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

John 12:26 "If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor."

- Introduction: The Remains of the Day

There's a famous novel about a man who was the butler to a wealthy British nobleman, a duke or an earl or something, who labored for years under the belief that someone who serves a great man is himself on the road to greatness. Set during World War 2, the butler works tirelessly for his employer as he sets up meetings with representatives of the German government in an effort to negotiate an end to the war. By the end of the book, the butler finds out that his nobleman employer was duped by German spies and was not great, or really significant in ending the war. In spite of his status, the nobleman wasn't a person of any real significance at all, leaving the butler questioning whether he had wasted his life and what was he going to do as he approached his elder years. We have some similarities, in that we define ourselves as Christians as a people who serve someone who is great, the greatest, in fact. We risk significance in our lives by following His assertion that the greatest ambition is not in accomplishment, power, position, wealth or fame, but in service. But it is a risk well taken.

- Set the stage

John's Gospel is 21 chapters long, and much of it details events that took place in the last months of the life of Jesus on earth. In chapter twelve, Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, causing his enemies to despair. Verse nineteen tells us that the Pharisees said among themselves, "you see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!" Right after that some people from Greece approach Philip asking for an audience with Jesus. Usually, "Greeks" in the New Testament was code for "anyone who is not Jewish" but here it may be that people who were actually Greek inquired. Jesus interpreted this as an indication that His time had come to be glorified in death. What He said here gives us much to consider. "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor." Many of His disciples have followed Him to self sacrifice and even martyrdom, but let's look at the last phrase for today; "if anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor."

- Christianity is ambitious: Those who serve Christ will be honored by the Father

Here's the main point to our message today, that Christianity actually has much room for ambition. It doesn't sound like it, will all the talk about self-sacrifice, servanthood, self-denial and submission, but the greatest honors are not afforded by government or the press, but by God the Father. There is no greater honor and so we are challenged not to

give up ambition, but to pursue the greatest of all ambitions. Consider the words, "to serve" and "to honor."

The word for "serve" as in "serve Christ" is the basis for the modern word, "deacon". It means "to wait upon" someone or "to be an attendant". It's based upon a verb that means "to run errands" for someone. Here is the true way for greatness for that poor butler in the novel. Not to serve someone who appears great, but isn't great; rather to serve someone who is the greatest of all. Jesus depicts those who "follow His road" in lifestyle and "run errands for Him" as led by the Holy Spirit as true servants. They will be honored by the Father.

Jesus did not detail what honor would be bestowed upon the faithful servant. The word means "to fix a value upon," or "to prize". So it will be something in which the Father declares the servant as valuable and respected. There are other parts of Scripture that talk about "rewards in heaven" but I really am not sure of their meaning. Imagine kneeling before the Lord Jesus and He declares, "come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." What more could you want? But rewards in heaven is another topic. By the way, that quote from Jesus comes from Matthew 25, which gives specific instructions about being a servant of Christ, as also Matthew 5-7.

- St. Francis Xavier-"give up your small ambitions"

The application is to view servanthood as great ambition. I remember hearing a speech in college that included a quote I never forgot. It was from St. Francis Xavier, the lesser known of the "St. Francis". St Francis of Assisi is better known. Xavier left an education at the prestigious University of Paris to become a missionary to Japan, a difficult assignment to say the least. We know that He wrote a letter to his friends at the university, studying to become doctors, lawyers, scholars, people of education and accomplishment. Xavier, a struggling missionary in a country that did not welcome him or his message, whose language was difficult, wrote his friends and told them to "give up their small ambitions". He did not commit himself to obscurity and a life with little meaning. He left behind great ambitions for greater ambitions. In fact, he considered what was done at the university to be "small ambitions". Servanthood is for the ambitious.

- Conclusion

Jesus, knowing that His days on earth were limited, spoke of that which was essential. He talked of dying to self and of servanthood, but he also spoke of honor from the Father. We know not much of what "honor from the Father" means, but we know that it is the greatest of ambitions is to serve Christ, and we have to be truly ambitious to pursue it.