

## Victorious Servant

Luke 19: 28 – 30 and 22: 24 – 34

March 28, 2010

### I. Introduction

- A. There's not very many pages in my Bible between Luke chapter 19 and Luke chapter 22
  - 1. However, there's a world of difference in our understanding of who God is
    - a. If we stop with the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem
  - 2. Or if we continue on through our text regarding Jesus' teaching
    - a. About who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven
- A. Many of us, if we had a choice about it, would prefer to follow Jesus
  - 1. In a victory parade, even when our leader is riding on a beast of burden
    - a. Rather than the traditional "white horse" more befitting to his status
- A. Following a leader who comes to us in the form of a servant -
  - 1. Having "emptied himself" as we read in Philippians 2
    - a. Of all the glory and power that was his in the heavenly realms
  - 2. So that he might take on human nature and human limitations
    - a. For the sake of showing us the ultimate power of love
  - 3. Following that kind of a leader is not very appealing to most of us
    - a. Until we become convinced that it is the only way to be truly victorious
- A. Victorious servant? It sounds implausible, perhaps even impossible
  - 1. Two opposites that can never be brought together
    - a. And humanly speaking, that may be true
  - 2. But as we approach the season in which we commemorate Jesus' death
    - a. Hoping for the final chapter to bring victory out of defeat
  - 3. We need to recognize that on the journey to the Easter resurrection
    - a. There is no way for Jesus to avoid the suffering, the humility
      - (1) And there is no way for followers of Jesus to avoid it either
- A. Since it's the season of March madness as well as the Lenten season
  - 1. Let me offer this illustration from the world of basketball playoffs
    - a. Illustrations always have their limitations, so don't take this one too literally
- A. But imagine that you are the star player on a college basketball team
  - 1. Your team has won its games all the way to the national championship round
    - a. And now you are playing in the game that decides the answer
  - 2. To that all-important question – who is the best basketball team in the nation

- A. Your team is ahead going into the fourth quarter – you’ve played well
  - 1. As you take the floor for those final minutes
    - a. You hear your name being shouted by the crowd, along with M-V-P
  - 2. You are thrilled, excited, ready to push ahead to the goal you’ve worked for so long
    - a. But then, you notice a big wet spot on the floor near the free-throw line
- A. You are about to call it to the attention of one of the referees
  - 1. When you suddenly remember something your father said long ago
    - a. And so, instead of asking someone else to bring the floor mop
      - (1) You go and take it from the hands of the attendant
    - b. And you mop up the wet spot yourself, making sure that you do it well
      - (1) Not because you could do it any better, but because it needed to be done
- A. Is that scenario likely to happen in the real world of college basketball?
  - 1. Probably not. But what if it did? What do you think people would say about it?
    - a. What a wonderful example to set for our younger kids to follow!
  - 2. Or, what a dumb thing to do! Keep your focus on the game!
    - a. Do you think they would continue shouting out your name? Or M-V-P?
      - (1) Or would they be too shocked to say anything at all?
  - 3. Doing the menial task of floor mopping, that’s for the kids
    - a. Who weren’t good enough to make it on the basketball team
  - 4. Certainly not the kind of job to be done by a future NBA star
    - a. Victorious servant? Doesn’t exactly fit in our world does it?
- A. But Jesus puts it in terms even closer to home for most of us
  - 1. Who is the greater – the guest of honor who sits at the head table
    - a. Welcomed, cheered, given all the accolades for a job well done
      - (1) Or the servers who bring the plates of food, and clear away the dirty dishes?
  - 2. But, Jesus said, I come among you as one of those who serve
- A. It must have come as quite a shock to those first disciples of Jesus
  - 1. Especially after the excitement of the procession into Jerusalem
    - a. And, at least in Luke’s account, the scene in the temple
      - (1) When Jesus drove out the wealthy and powerful merchants
    - b. Who were exchanging currency for a profit and selling animals for sacrifice
      - (1) At a price that took advantage of the people who came to worship
- A. I’ve always wondered what the disciples thought about that event

1. Was it a bad thing that Jesus would risk angering an influential group of people
  - a. Or was it a good thing that he was standing up for the common citizen
    - (1) Sounds like a political dilemma, doesn't it? And it truly was
2. But it was also a statement of authority and leadership
  - a. And I can't help but think the disciples were seeing a bright future
- A. Surely now was the time when Jesus would be widely acclaimed as the Messiah
  1. Surely now the religious rulers would acknowledge him as the one sent from God
    - a. To deliver the nation from political bondage and restore the throne of David
- A. With the power that Jesus had already demonstrated time and time again
  1. Nothing could stop him from taking his rightful place as king
    - a. And so they began to think about their positions in this kingdom
      - (1) Who would be the greatest? Jesus' "right-hand man" or "go-to" guy?
- A. Jesus had already faced this temptation of the devil in the wilderness
  1. We spoke about that back at the beginning of the Lenten season
    - a. And now his disciples were getting caught up in the same temptation
  2. It's one that continually comes to followers of Jesus even today
    - a. Claiming a position of power and authority, or the role of a servant
- A. Theologian and author, William H. Willimon, has said it this way –
  1. As churchpeople, we sometimes assume that we are immune to the temptations of power. We don't make much money. Society gives us so little power that we think ambition--the drive to succeed, achieve and have prestige and influence over others--is a problem only for people in business or politics, not for people like us.
  2. We thus sometimes fail to see how we get caught up, for the very noblest of reasons, in the same ambitions that motivate everybody. Eventually, the people climbing to the top of the body of Christ can look just like those scrambling to the top of General Motors. Often you can't tell much difference between our leaders and those of the gentiles.
    - a. Did I hear an "Amen" or an "ouch"?
- A. To be clear, Jesus does not say that the disciples would be doormats in the coming kingdom – there would be a role for them to fulfill
  1. But that role would not be about glory and adulation
    - a. And it would not exclude trials and suffering along the way
- A. As an example, he points to Peter and says – Simon, your time of testing will come

1. I have prayed for you, that you will not fail
    - a. But, in spite of your courage and boldness, you will deny me three times
  2. What a blow to the ego – but what a warning, for Peter and for us
    - a. When we are feeling our strongest, Jesus says, take heed lest you fall
- A. Well-known author, Henri Nouwen, has experienced that struggle
1. He writes - Everything in me wants to move upward. Downward mobility with Jesus goes radically against my inclinations, against the advice of the world surrounding me, and against the culture of which I am a part.
    - a. He's right; the position of a servant does not come naturally to us
- A. True humility does not come easily
1. So the question for us then becomes – can servants be victorious, too?
- II. That question is defined even further as we follow Jesus and his disciples
- A. Through the events of what we now call Holy Week
1. I would encourage you to attend a Maundy Thursday service this week
    - a. In which we will hear the reading of familiar scripture passages
      - (1) Retelling the story of the Passover Meal, the evening in Gethsemene
        - (a) Jesus' arrest and crucifixion
- A. The service will end in quietness and darkness
1. Symbolizing the gloom and despair that must have descended on Jesus followers
    - a. As they watched the events of the week unfolding
- A. From apparent triumph on Palm Sunday to apparent defeat on Good Friday
1. The story to that point would seem to say that good guys don't win
    - a. That humility gets swallowed up and spit out in the face of "real power"
      - (1) But thankfully, the story doesn't end there
        - b. And we look forward to glorious surprise of Easter Sunday morning
- A. In the Thursday evening service we will also celebrate communion and foot washing
1. Both are ways that Jesus chose to adapt the traditional Jewish Passover Meal
    - a. To fit the occasion of a last meal with his disciples before his death
- A. The bread and the cup of communion have come to represent our participation
1. In the body and blood of Jesus that was made a sacrifice on our behalf
    - a. The "new covenant" that transforms us from our sinful human condition
      - (1) Into a right relationship with a perfect and holy God
- A. Foot washing is also a symbolic re-enactment of Jesus' actions at that meal

1. When he got up from the table, took a towel and basin of water
    - a. And washed his disciples dusty, dirty feet
- A. One of the writers for the Lenten season devotionals from Goshen College
1. Described that act of Jesus as “doing something that needed to be done, that nobody else wanted to do”
    - a. It was usually the job of a servant, and none of the disciples offered to do it
  2. Peter even objected to Jesus washing his feet
    - a. Perhaps recognizing at least some of the implications
      - (1) Of a teacher, or rabbi, washing the feet of his disciples
  3. But Jesus’ response was that a true disciple must let Jesus perform this service
    - a. AND that his followers should also practice this same spirit of servanthood
- A. The ceremony of foot washing has become a tradition in many Anabaptist congregations
1. As a way of reminding us of this servant attitude that Jesus modeled
    - a. And encouraged us to practice in all of life
- A. But as I was thinking about washing feet, I realized that I have sometimes missed
1. An important point about what Jesus was teaching his disciples that night
    - a. Service is not an obligation that Jesus’ followers must fulfill
      - (1) So that we can get on with the real blessing of being a Christian
  2. And it is not only a by-product of receiving God’s love and forgiveness
    - a. Although the elements of a servant attitude – humility, gentleness, kindness
      - (1) Are considered to be fruit produced by the Holy Spirit in us
- A. Practicing servanthood is the way Jesus achieved his mission on earth
1. It was the path he followed, to victory – in his life, death, and in his resurrection
    - a. From beginning to end, serving was part and parcel of who Jesus was/is
  2. He humbled himself to come live on this earth in human form
    - a. His ministry involved continually serving the needs of those around him
      - (1) Especially those who were suffering and unable to help themselves
  3. He gave up his right to heaven’s protection, in order that he might die
    - a. The most cruel and humiliating death we can imagine
      - (1) The ultimate act of sacrificial service to a human race
        - (a) Many of whom would hate him and reject him
  4. If there is any other way possible, Jesus prayed that night in the garden
- A. But there was no other way, only the way of the obedient servant

1. And so he gave up his hold on life itself
    - a. In order to win the victory over our greatest enemies – death and hell
      - (1) It couldn't have happened any other way
  2. And the result, scripture tells us, is that one day every knee shall bow
    - a. In heaven and on earth, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord
      - (1) A victorious Servant? Scripture answers that question with a resounding "Yes"
- A. Washing the feet of a brother or sister is pretty minor stuff compared to dying
1. But it can be a good reminder to us of the importance of serving others
    - a. And yes, it is a symbolic gesture, most of us will not really need to have our feet washed in order to be clean
  2. But Jesus said to his disciples, and modeled with his life
    - a. That practicing the servant attitude is essential to being a part of God's kingdom
- A. Jesus didn't object to the cheers of the crowd along the road
1. As the triumphal procession made its way into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday
    - a. In fact, he pointed out the rightness of their praise
  2. By saying that if the people stopped cheering, the rocks would take up the chorus
- A. But, unlike many of us, who see success and victory as a means of escaping
1. The hard, dirty work of the servant
    - a. Jesus knew that popularity is a fleeting success
      - (1) Cheering only lasts until another champion is crowned
- A. Ultimate victory, for us as it was for Jesus, means following the path of a servant
1. May God grant us the humility, the grace and even the joy
    - a. Of living a life of service, to God and to those around us
  2. So that one day, we too, will find ourselves in the place of the victorious servant