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Luke 9:46-48 | An argument arose among the disciples as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

In the name of the One, Holy, and Living God. Amen.

An elderly woman had three grown-up sons who each decided to give her a special gift for her milestone birthday. Now these three sons were always competing with each other to see who was the greatest, outdoing each other at every turn.

The first son, who had become very successful in life, bought his mother a magnificent, spacious house. The second son, wanting to impress, gifted her a luxurious car. The third son, knowing how deeply religious his mother was, searched tirelessly for the perfect gift. After much effort, he discovered an extraordinarily rare parrot that could recite the entire Bible. All you needed to do was give it chapter and verse and away it went. The only catch was that the bird was in Madagascar and came with an astronomical price tag. Determined to make his mother happy and to outdo his brothers, the third son sold his house and car to afford the journey and purchase the parrot.

Sometime later, the elderly woman wrote to her sons to thank them.

To her first son, she wrote:

"Thank you for the beautiful house, my dear. It's truly wonderful, but it's far too big for me. I hope you won't mind, but I'm planning to sell it and move into a cozy little bungalow instead."

To her second son, she penned a similar note:

"The car is absolutely stunning, but it's much too large and fancy for my needs. I'm going to trade it in for something smaller and more practical."

Finally, to her third son, she wrote:

"Ah, you truly understood what means the most to me. Thank you so much for the dressed-up chicken—it was delicious!"

I love this story. As humorous as it maybe it points to a deeper truth we all carry. We all crave recognition, we all want to be seen and honored for who we are and what we do. We often want to know that we are better than that person over there, that we are smarter, or better off. We want others to see how good we are if only to prove ourselves right.

We live in an age and a culture obsessed with being the greatest. We live and move and have our being in a culture where greatness is measured in followers, titles, achievements, and influence. Even in the Church, no one is immune to the quiet tug of comparison, the subtle competition for relevance, the desire to be seen as significant. It is easy to shake our heads at the three brothers or smile knowingly at their misplaced priorities, but their pursuit is not far from our own.

And it is certainly not far from the disciples.

Because as soon as we set down the mother's letter, we pick up the Gospel and discover that the followers of Jesus—those who knew him best, who witnessed his compassion, healing, and humility firsthand—were caught in the very same struggle. They, too, wanted to know who was winning, who was rising, who was trending on all the socials, who was greatest in the kingdom they believed Jesus was about to unveil.

Now I must tell you these disciples of Jesus were not the brightest bulbs in the chandelier! And I love just how flawed and foolish they often could be. They have earned the title duh-ciples because most of the time they just don't get it. In our gospel for today, Jesus had been running around the Holy Land teaching, preaching and healing along the way. He had challenged the religious authorities, healed the broken and forgotten, and even raised a putrefying Lazarus for good measure. The disciples had seen where Jesus spent most of his time, because they were right there with him, in the trenches, knee deep in ministry on the margins.

Yet they missed the point.

They weren't being petty; they were being human.

They felt the pressure of a world that defined greatness by popularity, position, and proximity to power. They longed for assurance that their sacrifices, leave everything, take up your cross and follow me, meant something, that their loyalty would be rewarded, that their journey with Jesus would lead them somewhere more than last place.

And into that deeply human longing—into that very modern craving for greatness—Jesus steps with a disruptive, holy reversal.

This morning's gospel opens with an all too human scene that could quite easily be the headline for the times in which we live: *"An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest."* The disciples—those closest to Jesus, those who walked with him, prayed with him, witnessed miracles with him—find themselves jockeying for position, angling for honor, clinging to the illusion that proximity to Jesus might mean proximity to greatness.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, takes a little child—a person of no status, no power, no ability to repay, no standing, no influence—and places that child right beside him. Then he says, *"Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me...for the least among you is the greatest."*

In a single gesture, Jesus relocates greatness from the center of power to the margins of love. And we forget that this is exactly where Jesus lives.

Jesus in his earthly ministry inhabited not the center but the margins of power. He was born not in a palace but in a stable, raised not among the elite but among the ordinary. He didn't once eat with emperors or would be kings but with fishermen, tax collectors, women of courage, and men of doubt. Jesus' ministry unfolded in dusty streets and crowded hillsides, surrounded by the sick, the poor, the outcast, the forgotten.

The question for us at this time, in this place is have we as the Church forgotten that Jesus is found in voiceless, in the poor, in the immigrant and the strange? Have we forgotten that Jesus is the child of Mary, who sang of the lowly being lifted up, the powerful being sent away empty, the thrones of power being cast down, and who schooled him in revolution even before he was born. If you want to know where Jesus got all this from, I suspect you might want to talk to Mary.

Jesus points us to greatness that is found in humble service, in care and compassion for those who have been despised and rejected. That is where we as the church are called to be. Now more than ever!

It is a reminder that the Church is at her best

- when she remembers where she came from.
- when she washes feet rather than seeking thrones.
- when she serves the poor rather than courting the powerful.
- when she welcomes the child rather than competing for the crown.

It is a reminder that we are woven together not by our achievements, not by our positions, not by our ecclesial machinery—but by the wild, willful and wondrous Spirit of the living God.

Ours is a God who calls least, the last, and the lowest and sends them out to do the impossible and no power, no greatness, no tyrant will stop the movement of the people of God.

If barrenness couldn't stop Sarah,
if the sea couldn't stop Moses,
if fear couldn't stop Deborah,
if a wall couldn't stop Joshua,
if hunger couldn't stop Ruth,
if a giant couldn't stop David,
if exile couldn't stop Esther,
if shame couldn't stop Photini,
if prison couldn't stop Paul,
if doubt couldn't stop Mary Magdalene,
and if death could not stop Jesus—then in Christ, nothing can stop you.

Because the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is alive, and moving, and working in you today.

Not someday. Not when the Church gets it “together.” And God knows we have to hard most days work **to hold it together** furthermore getting it together.

That same Spirit of God who can move mountains with a mustard seed of faith—
that same Spirit who hovered over chaos in creation,
who overshadowed Mary with possibility,
who descended upon Jesus in the Jordan like a dove
and drove him into the wilderness with courage—
that same Spirit is still stirring in the Church today.

It is the Spirit who anoints Jesus to proclaim good news to the poor,
release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.

It is the Spirit who loosens the tongues of the disciples at Pentecost
and sends them stumbling into the streets speaking every language of mercy.

It is the Spirit who turns locked rooms into launching pads,
who takes fishermen and makes them apostles,
who takes doubters and makes them witnesses,
who takes persecutors and makes them preachers,
who takes the timid and makes them bold.

That same Spirit who breathed life into the cosmos,
who breathes life into dry bones
breathes life into us.

That same Spirit that filled Elizabeth with joy,
Simeon with hope,
Paul with fire,
and Mary Magdalene with resurrection courage—
that Spirit has been poured out upon you.

It is the Spirit who knits us together,
who binds us in love,
who strengthens us to serve,
and who reminds us—again and again—that greatness in the kingdom of God
is found not in being first, but in being faithful.

For such a time as this we need a Church, a people of faith, followers of Jesus who practice and proclaim the words of that old spiritual, who risk being transformed as we pray;

*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me,
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me,
Melt me mold me. Fill me use me.
Spirit of the Living God Fall fresh on me.*

This time calls for a Spirit filled Church, because only a humble Church alive and moving with the Spirit of God has any hope of transforming this world. **It is time for us as a church to stop being so concerned about where we have been that we lose sight of where God is calling us to be.** It is time that we put away the idolatry of worshipping our buildings and take on the mantle of serving the poor.

It is no accident that the Church holds up the life of St. Herman of Alaska as an example of greatness.

For those for whom St. Herman is not a household name, he never held high office. He was not a bishop, not a theologian of renown. He did not command armies or occupy thrones. He was a simple monk who crossed the world to serve the Indigenous peoples of Alaska. When others came to conquer, Herman came to wash the feet of those deemed "savages". When others sought wealth, Herman sought to share compassion. When others brought death and disease, Herman brought healing. When others brought exploitation, Herman brought dignity.

He lived among the Aleut people as a brother, not a benefactor. When epidemics ravaged communities, he tended the sick. When others abused their power, Herman defended the vulnerable. When the world saw "natives," Herman saw *neighbors*. When the empire came to extract, Herman came to love.

St. Herman did not ask who was the greatest—because he already knew the answer.

The least among you is the greatest.

The child at Jesus' side.

The oppressed in Alaska.

The ones the world forgets, yet God remembers.

Herman understood that the Gospel is not dressed up—it is **enfleshed**, it is incarnate.

It tires. It wrinkles.

It suffers. It heals.

It dies. It rises.

This enfleshed Gospel—God among us in Jesus—does not dominate; it transforms.

It does not hoard power; it redeems it.

It does not mirror the world’s cruelty; it unveils God’s compassion.

And St. Herman lived it.

We are called to do the same!

We live in a time of deep division. We live in a time where those in power seem bent on breaking the poor and the most vulnerable. We live in a time where our leaders stoke our differences and weaponize fear in the pursuit of power.

Now more than ever the world needs the Church. **But a divided Church cannot serve a divided world.**

If we cannot be woven together across our differences, how can we mend the tearing fabric of our society? If we cannot welcome the child in our midst, how can we welcome the Christ who stands outside our door? If we cannot move toward one another in love, how will we ever move the world toward justice?

We are called in this time to be woven together in Christ! Yet, unity in Christ is not sameness; it is solidarity. We must stand with those who are being detained and deported, we must companion those who hungry and hurting, we must serve those who are doubting and in despair. But we must do it **TOGETHER!**

To those who would claim the mantle of Christian, who would seek greatness I say to you today; You cannot claim the faith of Jesus, and then despise the very people whom he loved.

You cannot claim the faith of Jesus and then disenfranchise the poor, the marginalized, the weak, and the vulnerable.

You cannot claim the faith of Jesus, and then vote to take away basic healthcare for children, and safety nets for seniors!

You cannot claim the faith of Jesus, and then take food from the working poor and declare it greatness!

You cannot cloak yourself in a mantle of a Christian faith that starves the working poor, denigrates women, marginalize people of color, despise immigrants, neglect the needs of children, and prioritize the rich! Jesus had some things to say about that. "You are whitewashed tombs" Matthew 23:27-28

Any version of Christianity more invested in preserving privilege than proclaiming good news to the poor has forgotten the One it claims to follow.

Any version of Christianity more eager to guard its own comfort than to guard the dignity of God's children has wandered far from the heart of Jesus.

Any version of Christianity more concerned with the *love of power* than the *power of love* is a faith that needs to die.

Because only Love can lift us!

The kind of love that lifts the lowly.

The kind of love that names evil and confronts injustice.

The kind of love that refuses to despise the people Jesus loves.

As a church we can often suffer from a poverty of imagination. Like a mighty tortoise moves the Church of God, siblings we are threading where we've always trod!

The time has come to put away such things.

It is time for us to stop just talking about Jesus and be about Jesus!

It is time we stop pointing to Jesus and go out and show Jesus!

It is high time we stop just saying good things about Jesus and actually apprentice our lives to Jesus!

We must ask ourselves, **"Have we become so afraid of the church dying that we have ceased living?"** Have we ceased risking for the sake of the gospel? Have we ceased dreaming of the day of justice?" Perhaps the Church needs to die, so that God can call it to new life!

In the library of Calvary Church in Columbia, MO is a black and white picture of an African American man ringing Calvary's bell. The picture looks like any other picture you would find in a church, celebrating its past, capturing a moment in the life of the church. On the back of that photo is the story of the picture and an article. The man in the photo is Arthur Wilkins who once served as sexton at Calvary. He was a Black man who lived and worked during the 1940s and 1950s, a time when dignity and equality were often denied. Yet day after day, Arthur showed up. He unlocked the doors before dawn so that others could come to pray. He swept the floors, polished the brass, tended the garden, and made sure that when Sunday came, the house of God was ready.

Arthur's name may not appear in any history book, but I believe it is written in the heart of God. His quiet faithfulness preached a sermon louder than many pulpits could manage. Mr. Wilkins, showed up at a time when showing up could cost him his life and the people of Calvary showed what God's radically welcoming love looked like in calling him their own.

Mr. Wilkins was, in his own way, a saint like Herman – a man of the margins, whose labor was love, whose vocation was service, whose life was prayer. He reminds us that greatness in God's kingdom does not come from position, but from presence.

Because holiness is not found in power or privilege – it's found in those who quietly bear the light.

So, what does it mean to be *woven together* in this moment of history, in this season of the Church?

It means we must learn again to serve and to love.

We must reclaim a prophetic imagination that dares to dream beyond fear, beyond division, beyond scarcity.

It means that as the winds of change blow, we do not run for cover – we spread our sails.

For this time calls us to be pastoral *and* prophetic, gentle *and* bold, rooted *and* reaching.

We must call out injustice.

We must name evil.

We must speak the truth in love.

We must comfort the afflicted – and, when necessary, afflict the comfortable.

We must embody the enfleshed Gospel that St. Herman lived – a Gospel that walks with the weary, feeds the hungry, welcomes the stranger, and never gives up on the world God made and called good.

That does not mean the path of faith will be easy
and it does not mean we forgo hardship.

It means that, as St. Paul reminds us, we must put on the **whole** armor of God. To fasten the belt of truth, to wear the breastplate of righteousness, to take up the shield of faith. Because there is an ill wind blowing in our land – a wind of anger and division that seeks to destroy community, diversity, and hope. It blows not only in the world, but within the Church itself. It tempts us to retreat, to circle the wagons, to guard our comfort rather than risk our calling.

The winds of division may blow—and they are blowing fiercely in our world today—but they will not have the last word. The God of Hagar, the God of Esther, the God of the Aleut people, the God of the God of St. Herman, the God of Arthur Wilkins, the God who is love, *will have the last word*.

We are woven together in this time to bind up the broken,
lift up the left out,
and mend the maligned.

We are woven together to speak truth in love

and to comfort the afflicted.

We are woven together to challenge systems of cruelty

and to embody communities of compassion.

And so, siblings in Christ hear once more the Good News of Jesus:

Greatness in the kingdom of God is not how high you stand,

but how deeply you serve.

Not how loud your voice (or tweets),

but how open your heart.

Not how powerful your position,

but how Christlike your presence.

St. Herman lived that truth.

Arthur lived that truth.

Jesus embodies that truth.

May we—woven together by the Spirit—live that truth too.

In the name of the One who welcomes the child,

who walks with the forgotten,

and who weaves us into a love that cannot be broken.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us,

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us,

Melt us mold us. Fill us use us.

Spirit of the Living God fall fresh on us.

AMEN.