

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, August 24, 2025

Saint Bartholomew

Solemn Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on

1 Corinthians 4:9-15; Luke 22:24-30

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Greatness comes through humble service.

A dispute arose among the disciples as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

Even though I have lived in New York for eleven years now, I am still learning American ways and American phrases. The other day, I was talking to my personal trainer about today's Gospel reading, and the disciples arguing about which of them was the greatest. "Ah!" he said, "A GOAT debate!" "What?" I said, "Yes, goat," he said, – "like how you describe the basketball player Michael Jordan – he's a GOAT – Greatest Of All Time."

I guess that's another way of looking at the way that certain kings and popes in history have sometimes been afforded the suffix 'the great' after their name.

Greatness in history has always been seen as strength, skill, power wisdom, and all of it exemplified by the one who lives to a ripe old age. But when Jesus hears the disciples arguing about greatness, he says the opposite:

Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves."

How can the youngest be the greatest? How can the leader lead if he is to be like a servant or even a slave?

Jesus gives them the answer:

"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."

I am among you as one who serves.

And he put this into practice at the last supper, when he took off his outer garment, girded himself with a towel, and washed the disciples' feet. This act of humility – almost an enacted parable, reminds us of the opening of Paul's letter to the Philippians:

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*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)*

This was the example he gave to his disciples; this is the example that he has given to the church. To be great in the Kingdom of God is to be humble and characterized by love-filled service, not domination or control.

It was Sir Winston Churchill who famously said, “*The price of greatness is responsibility.*”^[1]

If we want to be great, we have to live responsible lives, and that means putting others first, and ourselves last; and, as a Church, as the Body of Christ, forming a community that exemplifies the values of the Kingdom of God.

In our Epistle reading, Paul spells this out in relation to the ministry of Apostles:

We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands.

Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, who saw for himself what the lure of greatness can do to dehumanize when exploited, nevertheless, urged his listeners to be great – to seek true greatness, but only because they had understood the lesson that Jesus had taught his disciples. He said this:

In Christ... three dimensions of truly great people are revealed. Only great people will fulfil the following three dimensions: First, justice that is proven through persecution; Second, service animated by love; Third, a transcendence that identifies the weakest and the humblest with God.^[2]

Paul goes on to say, “*When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.*”

The price of greatness is responsibility; the practice of greatness in the Christian community one of Christ-like service.

For us, here, at Saint Thomas, how do we proclaim justice in our own day? And are we prepared for persecution and the attacks of those who want to see us fail?

Is our service to one another, to the poor and the homeless, to the hungry and to the asylum-seeker truly animated out of love, rather than a sense of duty?

Is our search for the beauty of holiness helping *all* to come close to God so that our community, our building, and our worship is truly inclusive the way that Jesus Christ would have it be, rather than based on secular notions of political correctness?

The disciples argued over who was the greatest; they were striving for something that, ultimately, would not satisfy them. Whenever the disciples tried to be greater than someone else, they failed; whenever they tried to control others or dominate, their ministry lacked authenticity.

As we celebrate Bartholomew the Apostle, about whom we know so little, we celebrate that humility – his lack of story and lack of cult-status; his lack of greatness in the eyes of the world. He followed Jesus and, yet, the Gospels record so little about him; for, ironically in the eyes of the world, the Apostles' strength came through acknowledging their weakness. They became small in the eyes of the world so that Christ's message would be amplified. In the end, Bartholomew's martyrdom is how he is remembered, for the word martyr means 'to bear witness' and if Saint Thomas Church is to be great, then we must also bear that kind of witness to the world.

"The price of greatness is responsibility."

Justice that is proven through persecution;

Service animated by love;

A transcendence that identifies the weakest and the humblest with God.

Jesus said, *"I am among you as one who serves."*

References

- 1 Winston Churchill (2013). "Never Give In!: Winston Churchill's Speeches", p.292,
 - 2 Sermon preached on Sunday, September 23, 1979 (The Romesco Trust)
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