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WHO'S THE GREATEST

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 19, 2003.
Scripture: Job 38:1-7; Mark 10:35-45

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY GHOST. AMEN.

Back in the 60s Janis Joplin use to sing,

*Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.
Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?*

Janis reminds me of a lot of my own "gimme" prayers. Her song also reminds me of the request of James and John to Jesus. *'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'* And he said to them, *'What is it you want me to do for you?'* And they said to him, *'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'* In other words, "We'd like you to make us secretary of defense and secretary of state when you take your place on your messianic throne. We'd like to have the top places, the places of greatest honor."

Now I've always encouraged my sons to be the best they can be, to excel, and to aim for the sky. But in the kingdom of God being the best we can be and excelling and aiming for the sky takes on a different look.

Let me put the request of James and John in context. By this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus has predicted his suffering and death three times, in chapters 8, 9, 10. In chapter 8, Peter confessed that he believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Jesus said, "You're right. But I'm not the kind of Messiah you're expecting. People are going to betray me, I'm going to suffer and die and then rise from the dead." Peter and the disciples just didn't get what he was saying. In the next chapter, Jesus again predicted his suffering, death and resurrection while the disciples argued about who was going to be the greatest in Christ's kingdom. They just didn't understand. Now, in chapter 10, for a third time Jesus predicts his suffering, death and resurrection. Immediately following his prediction James and John ask him, *'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. Grant us to sit, one at your right hand*

and one at your left, in your glory. They just didn't get it. They didn't understand that his kingdom, the kingdom of the Messiah, wouldn't come except through suffering, rejection and death.

Jesus taught, that the place of greatest honor, the place closest to Jesus is the place of serving others. In the words of William Willimon, "Jesus didn't teach upward mobility. Jesus taught outward mobility. In fact, Jesus warned about the downward slope of upward mobility. The church is not in this world to serve and save itself. There are far too many churches whose only goal is to survive, to keep safe, to form circles that look in.

Let me describe a high school classroom experiment. A teacher asked his students to stand up and form a circle around their classroom. The students encircled the room, facing each other. The teacher asked them if they could imagine another way of making a circle. They gathered closer and held hands to form an unbroken circle. He asked them to think of another way of making a circle. Finally he had to suggest that they make a circle facing outward. The point the teacher was making is that we can create an inward facing circle or an outward facing circle. The Risen Christ calls his church and all the members of his church to form a close-knit circle of men and women who face outward rather than inward; outward in mission, rather than facing inward with thoughts of simply surviving.

Last week you gave me a wonderful pastor appreciation dinner. I was placed in the middle of the head table with Kay at my right hand and my sister at my left. It was a place of honor for us and I was deeply moved. Thank you so much for your love and thoughts. I've enjoyed reading through the wonderful scrapbook with the moving notes and letters. But the "number ones" last Sunday were not those of us sitting at the head table, but the quiet ones slipping in and out of the kitchen among the congregation filling pitchers with ice tea and water. The great ones were those preparing the food in the kitchen and cleaning up afterwards and then staying hours after the others had left to set up the room for Monday morning. The great ones were those who planned and put together my scrap book. And above all those who simply pray for one another and the world outside.

Today we have the joy of receiving new members. May they and all of us understand, as James and John and the early disciples did not, that the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ has called us not simply to be members – not simply names on a roll - but to be servants – through our giving of our time, talent, money, and whatever spiritual gifts we have. This afternoon we have a wonderful opportunity to serve the Lord by walking in the Crop walk or pledging to our walkers so that we might be able to serve food to hungry people in Oxford, the Avon Grove area and throughout the world.

Someone forwarded me an email message which gives us a wonderful picture of how the Risen Christ has called us to be great by serving others.

A few years ago, at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one little boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times, and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and looked back. Then they all turned around and went back...every one of them. One girl with Down's syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood, the cheering went on for several minutes. People who were there are still telling the story. Why? Because deep down we know this one thing: What matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means slowing down and changing our course.

Jesus said, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Let us pray: God of love and compassion, you poured out your life in service in your Son, Jesus Christ. By word and example he taught us to find fulfillment in giving ourselves, and greatness in serving others. Empower us by the grace of your Spirit, that your whole church may give its life for the sake of the world, in the name of Jesus Christ who came not to be served, but to serve. Amen.