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Isaiah 53:4-12, Mark 10:35-45
A Raindrop in the Sea

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me start by reading again the conclusion of this morning's Gospel Lesson – this time using the *New Revised Standard Version* translation. I like the simple way in which it talks about authority among the Gentiles as opposed to true greatness in this world:

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, “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. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:41-45, NRSV)

I call this sermon “A Raindrop in the Sea.” This title comes from a moving email from one of our members about a possible sermon topic. She wondered about the fragility of our good deeds and how hopeless it seems that we can make much difference in this world. One of her great lines in her email used the image of a raindrop:

But sometimes, especially in the City, it can feel like a raindrop battling the sea.

Hopeless, yes? How can mere raindrops change the nature of the sea?

MOTHER TERESA OF CALCUTTA

In trying to answer, I peak ahead now to my All Saints sermon, November 4th, two Sundays from now. In that sermon I mean to speak of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Recently, one of her Confessors, Fr. Leo Maasburg, gave a lecture about Mother Teresa at nearby Our Lady of Good Counsel Church. He showed slides of Mother Teresa and of her work. Two of the slides were almost identical. They showed the hovels of the desperate poor among whom Mother Teresa ministered. Though the photos looked alike, they were in fact separated in time by many years

– maybe twenty years. And so the question was asked, “Mother Teresa, how have you actually changed things? The poor are just as poor as ever. They suffer still.”

To this question, Mother Teresa simply answered, “I never set out to change the world. I simply wanted to see Jesus in each poor person standing before me.”

“I never set out to change the world.” Let us note that this does not mean that Mother Teresa would not welcome change. It was simply that her goal was different. She was not trying to change the world, but to change the human heart.

Ahh, but she did change the world, now didn't she? Each of her deeds was small – hardly capable of being measured against the vast suffering of this world. Yet our world would have been vastly poorer without the quiet deeds of Mother Teresa. Like the vast ocean: without the raindrops, it eventually becomes desolate fields of salt.

The theme of this morning's Bible Lessons is that heaven measures things differently from the earth. Humble deeds of love, encouragement, and service are the truly great things on earth. It is not just that they are *perceived* so by the angels. It is more along the lines that they are the *only things that count*. They are the only deeds that will stand on the great Judgment Day. They are the raindrops that keep the oceans from become salt wastes.

ISAIAH 53

I mean to turn to those vainglorious disciples, James and John, soon. But let me begin by taking a glance at our First Lesson. It is one of the Songs of the Suffering Servant from Isaiah. There are many moving passages in this reading -- passages that especially tug at our hearts during Holy Week and the story of our Lord's Passion. Let me lift up a verse toward the end of the reading. It speaks of the suffering of the holy Servant, and of his vindication. Here is the verse:

¹²*Therefore* I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; *because* he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:12, RSV)

Note the grounds for the divine vindication: “*because* he poured out his soul to death.” It does not say that the Lord cherishes the Servant and divides him a portion with the great because of his splendor or because of his noble bearing, but because of his humiliation, his self-sacrifice, his being mangled by the world as he tries to save others. In the pagan myths, it is the one who goes from victory to victory who makes it to heaven. Hercules, who triumphs in his seven labors, is honored by heaven and earth. Achilles, who kills Hector and drags his body round the city, is honored. Thor, after slaying many a giant with his mighty hammer, is honored among the north people. It is the way of the legends to honor the glorious ones of life.

Yes, and we do the same in ordinary life. If the King enters the restaurant, the owner quickly shows him to the best seat. Why, the King might already be pudgy and suffering from high cholesterol owing to the many fancy meals he has already enjoyed, but it is the way of the world to give the glorious one even more glory.

But in our Isaiah passage, the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth, rewards not the beautiful one, not the triumphant one, but the one who is bruised, afflicted, smitten, wounded, perhaps too simple-minded or exhausted even to protest when he is treated badly:

⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7, RSV)

Heaven measures things differently from earth. But in the end, heaven's view is the one that counts. If in today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus teaches a new vision of leadership to those ambitious disciples James and John, let it be known that he is not really departing from Israel's old vision, for Israel has always cherished the One who "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows," despised, rejected, bruised, and afflicted though he be along the way.

KING HEROD ANTIPAS

Now, turning to our Gospel Lesson, let us note that our Lord's discussion of true greatness in God's kingdom began with the story of a very different kind of king. I mean Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee. Today's reading is from Mark 10. It was just a few chapters back, Mark 6, that we read the horrifying story of Herod's beheading of John the Baptist. There was a king as the world too often measures a king: an indulged and pampered man, surfeit, drowsy, piling luxury on top of luxury. A case calling for justice lies in his hands: John the Baptist languishes in Herod's prison. Herod knows that John is a righteous man. But he does not release him. Instead, John waits in his dungeon, wondering when his executioner will arrive, while the one called "king" feasts and makes wild promises to the dancing girl. Who is the true king here? That good man John the Baptist, with his poverty and asceticism and his wholehearted devotion to God, is much more a royal figure than is Herod.

So, Herod lies behind Jesus in today's Gospel story, and ahead of him waits Pilate, so ready to dip his hands into the basin and to wash his hands of Jesus. The Twelve Disciples are alarmed for Jesus because he has been talking strangely to them of troubles awaiting him in Jerusalem:

³³Saying, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to

the Gentiles: ³⁴And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again. (Mark 10:33-34, KJV)

That Jesus would die, well, yes, the disciples could understand that, for we all die. But that he should die so *soon* and so young and so despised in the process, that was nigh incomprehensible to the Twelve. That he should be mocked and scourged and spat upon -- why that was outrageous to the Twelve!

So, King Herod lies behind, and the Roman Governor Pilate lies ahead. And in the middle, we have James and John coming to Jesus and talking about high seats of glory in the coming Kingdom. What a miss-match! What a conflict of conceptions concerning the true nature of glory on earth.

JAMES AND JOHN

My man James rather lets me down in the story. This is the James who is called "James the Greater," to distinguish him from another of the apostles -- one named James, son of Alphaeus. Carol and I hastened off to see his remains at Santiago de Compostela this past May. So, James is honored in church history as a true saint and martyr for our Lord Jesus, along with his brother John.

Those two, James and John, were part of the "inner three disciples" of our Lord, along with Peter. Peter, James, and John, were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. With their eyes there, they saw the radiant, transformed robes of Jesus. That, they saw. But with their ears, they seem to have missed or forgotten the words of the voice from heaven:

⁷And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; *listen to him.*" ⁸And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only. (Mark 9:7-8, RSV)

"Listen to him, James and John. Listen!" And I guess they did listen to Jesus, but in today's story we find that if they listened, they had trouble taking it all in.

And that is how it is, always. The human spirit in this fallen world has to struggle to accept what Jesus is saying here. It seems to run against our nature:

...whoever would be great among you must be your *servant*,
⁴⁴and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.
(Mark 10:43-44, RSV)

Jesus does not mean simply that the humble one will be rewarded someday. No, I think he means something even more profound: that the humble one is already the great one in this world. And pampered, stuffed Herod sitting on his throne, ordering the beheading of John the Baptist, is not great at all. He might

think he is great. Everyone around him might flatter him and call him great, but the eyes of reality, he is a small, despicable man, and the one who executes is the great man.

OUR AUDIENCE

This matter of greatness has much to do with the audience before whom we hold ourselves to be performing. If we are not careful, it will be easy to perform for the world. It will be easy to try to look good in the eyes of the world, along with the displays of wealth and power and cleverness that seems always to catch the eye of the world.

But in the eyes of the angels and of the saints and of the One who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,” humble deeds of service and the pouring out of our strength and resources -- these are the truly great things on earth.

THE LITTLE MAID

I finish now by pointing us ahead to next Sunday, Reformation Sunday. I hope to put us in the spirit of that Sunday by lifting up a bit Luther’s praise of the “little maid.” Luther cherished the Ten Commandments and believed them to be a treasure for a Christian. There is no sadness in Luther when it comes to the Commandments. He writes that the monks and nuns, for all their asceticism and self-imposed silence, have nothing to compare with a child who obeys her mother, because the child has the advantage that she is walking in the way of the Fourth Commandment, which bids her to honor mother and father:

What will become of these poor wretched people when, standing in the presence of God and the whole world, they will blush with shame before a little child who has lived according to this commandment and will confess that with their entire lives they are not worthy to offer that child a drink of water? (Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, “The Fourth Commandment”)

No one notices the little child obeying her parents, it is such a small deed on earth. Yet Luther sides with Jesus in this matter of greatness. The truly great deeds on earth are deeds of quiet of obedience to the will of God, especially to God’s will that we should pour out our strength on behalf of others.

And so we come to Luther’s praise of the little maid. He praises her in the process of praising the Ten Commandments. He counts the quiet obedience of the little servant girl to be worth more than the showy deeds of even a great cathedral. Luther’s words go thus:

It seems to me that we shall have our hands full to keep these commandments, practicing gentleness, patience, love toward enemies, chastity, kindness, etc., and all that is involved in doing so. But such works are not important or impressive in the eyes of the world. They are not uncommon and showy, reserved to certain special times, places, rites, and ceremonies, but are common, everyday domestic duties of one neighbor to another, with nothing glamorous about them. Those other deeds captivate all eyes and ears. Aided by great splendor, expense, and magnificent buildings, they are so adorned that everything gleams and glitters. There is burning of incense, singing and ringing of bells, lighting of candles and tapers until for all of this nothing else can be seen or heard. For when a priest stands in a golden chasuble, or a layperson spends a whole day in the church on his or her knees, that is considered a precious work that cannot be sufficiently extolled. But when a poor servant girl takes care of a little child or faithfully does what she is told, this is regarded as nothing. (Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, “Conclusion of the Ten Commandments”)

The little girl who gets a drink of water for her feverish mother is doing the kind of deed that sparkles in heaven’s eyes and catches the admiration of the One who came, not to climb a throne, but to climb a cross that others might live, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.