

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

Lord, help us to love you more than our anxiety about earthly things.  
Never forsake us; we hold fast to you.  
Amen.

Jesus' disciples were, evidently, a lot like us. When Jesus asked them what they were arguing about on the way, they were silent because they were arguing about who was the greatest. Someone wrote of our culture that we are "programmed for success." From our school days onward, we're given grades of one sort or another that serve to position us among others, and to mercilessly measure our own performance as well. We are so used to this system that we just accept it as the way things are; the way it ought to be. After all, who doesn't want to be programmed for success? Who doesn't want to be the greatest? In the context of unabashed striving for excellence and achievement, what can Jesus' teaching possibly mean, when he says to the disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." We are attracted to the sentiment of sacrifice of self and of humble service, but only for a moment are we silent, and then we are back to business as usual. Garrison Keillor's signature joke is that in Lake Wobegone, "All the women are strong, all the men are handsome, and all the children are above average." But the real joke is that we actually believe it. It could be our creed. It is our creed. It is what you believe when you argue about who is the greatest, or panic if your child is not in classes for the gifted and talented.

We could dismiss this dynamic in our psyches as, well, clearly overdeveloped, but for the most part harmless. We could do that, except that in the Gospel Jesus ups the ante. He puts sacrifice of self at the heart and center of his own identity. "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." The Son of Man, the Son of God, is last of all and servant of all, and in his sacrifice and service all of God's goodness and love is revealed to us fully and completely. We know that this is true because we saw it happen. Jesus was faithful to this way of divine being to the end. He gave himself up to death, death on a cross. "Therefore," Paul says, "God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." We are not talking about racking up some hours of community service here. We are talking about what it means to be hid with Christ in God. We are talking about the way of divine being to which we are called. A wisdom from above that is pure, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, no trace of partiality or hypocrisy. We are called to be a harvest of peace as Christ himself is our peace. The way we pray speaks this faith to us: We offer and present to thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that we may be filled with your grace and benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him." That is our prayer. Our creed.

A Chinese Christian woman in her fifties, who endured an abusive marriage for years, finally stood up to her husband—"I kept the restaurant, he took the house." Then he went back to China with his mistress. She raised her children alone through school and went to college herself.

Then a call came from China. Her ex-husband was injured in a drunken brawl and was in a coma in a Shanghai hospital. She took the children and immediately went to China. "The

mistress had no intention of staying with him, so I told her to pack her bags and leave us alone.” The brain damage was severe, but eventually they all flew back to the U.S. “I didn’t want to bring him back, but something inside me said that this is what Christ would do.” He has a room in the house and goes to daycare when the family is at work or school. “I am living my own life, I am happy.” Here is wisdom from above, that is pure and undeserved self-giving, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, no trace of partiality, or hypocrisy. A harvest of peace as Christ himself is her peace. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,” she said. “What else could I do?” What else indeed.

So while we waste our time arguing who is the greatest, while our church argues about correct believing, and who is, and who isn’t a sinner or a heretic, there are among us those who have something inside them that says that this is what Christ would do, and who are last of all and servant of all. God highly exalts them. We barely understand them. But they show Christ to us. Because of them, we know that you love us, O Lord. Never forsake us—we hold fast to you.+

*Amen*