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The Prevailing Church: Serves

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TEXT: Matthew 20:17-28 (ESV)

And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way He said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and He will be raised on the third day."

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Dear Friends:

A renowned Christian author from the last century named G.K. Chesterton wrote these instructive words for the church: "We don't want, as the newspapers say, a church that

will move with the world. We want a church that will move the world." Now, having read the gospels and what Jesus said about the church and the kingdom, I think He would say, "Well said," to that statement. For the past few Sundays, we've been learning from Jesus about being His prevailing church in the world. So far, we've learned from Him that a prevailing church is built upon a strong confession of faith in Christ Jesus alone. It has a strong commitment to the cause of Christ. It's also strongly committed to community building and unity, and the prevailing church must have a strong emphasis on God's grace.

Today's passage is our final bit of instruction from Jesus. And the context is this: He has once again predicted his own suffering and death and resurrection to the disciples. He uses some dark, foreboding words to describe His future, and the disciples don't seem to get it or want to get it, perhaps. We know this from the scene that follows: the prediction. The mother of James and John, two of His disciples, enters the scene displaying some confusion about Jesus. She sees a kingly throne when she looks at Jesus, and a victorious political future. So she asks Jesus to give her sons special positions in His future administration. A conversation ensues between the brothers and Jesus, He says, "Are you able to drink the cup I'm going to drink?" He's actually talking about His own suffering and death. They don't understand that, and so they say, "We're able." And then He says, "Well, you will drink of that cup," (and by the way, they did,) "but the positions you're asking for," Jesus says, "are not mine to give. Only God has the authority for that."

Now, the other disciples, upon hearing this conversation, become indignant with James and John. Of course they are, because in all likelihood, they wanted those special spots themselves and they just hadn't found the courage to ask Jesus yet. Well, it's at this point that Jesus sits them all down and He explains to this overly self-ambitious bunch what kingdom life is all about under His leadership. We can consider this explanation of His as instruction for the church to follow. The essence of His teaching is this: it's that we operate differently from the world's ways. Rulers of the world like the lord it over others and exercise their authority over others, but it shall not be so among you, Jesus says. He says our number one value in the church is service. Whoever's great among you is a servant, that's God's idea of real greatness.

Now, folks in the church sometimes all too easily lose sight of this principle that Jesus is teaching. We're prone to develop a consumer-like attitude that says, "What's in this for

me? What's the church doing for me? Serve me. Take care of me." The culture finds its way into a congregation so easily, turning us into consumers wanting to be waited upon and served. "It's all about me." And sometimes there is power-grabbing and attention-grabbing in the church as well. Pastors, as well as other formal and informal leaders in the body of Christ get to thinking to themselves, "This is my church and it should operate the way I think it ought to operate." I've found that it's very easy to be tempted to shoot for stardom in the church instead of servanthood. Stardom looks so much more glamorous because the applause of others feels wonderful. We like to have people look up to us and think that we are something special. But, you know, these destructive attitudes can cause some real problems within the church of Christ, and render us ineffective for filling the mission that He's given us.

I read a sad but all-too-often true little story that illustrates this. It's about four people in the church whose names were Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. The church had financial responsibilities and Everybody was asked to help. Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it. But you know who did it? Nobody. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done. Then the church grounds needed some work and Somebody was asked to help, but Somebody got angry about that because Anybody could have done it just as well. And after all, it was really Everybody's job. In the end, the work was given to Nobody and Nobody did a fine job. On and on, this went whenever work was to be done, Nobody could always be counted on. Nobody visited the sick, Nobody gave liberally, Nobody shared his faith. In short, Nobody was a very faithful member. Finally, the day came when Somebody left the church and took Anybody and Everybody with them. Guess who was left? Nobody.

And, you know, it's especially heartbreaking about this is. This kind of thinking is not at all in line with what our master Jesus had in mind for us. We learn from Him in this passage that servanthood equals a great, prevailing church. A great church is filled with great people who, out of love for Christ, serve – passionately serve others around them. In fact, Jesus goes on to say, that happens to be my personal mission statement. The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. Now, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, a subject of His kingdom, and I really hope you are, then seriously consider this truth that we've just learned. You are following a king who came to serve, not be served, who gave His life as a ransom for

many, for you and for me. He's a servant king. He gave Himself away for the sake of others. We learn from Paul in Philippians 2 as he's encouraging servanthood, he says, Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death, on a cross.

And he goes on to say, and God exalted Him. Ultimately at the cross, Jesus emptied himself out for us to pay the ransom for our sins. He gave himself for us so that we might be set free from sin and its consequences. That was his sole purpose in His life: the cross – to serve us through the cross. The entire existence of our king named Jesus is summed up in a single word then: service. And it was a service that knew no limits, but went all the way even to a cross where He died as the suffering servant for a sinful humanity.

So if Jesus is all-serving and all about serving, then what's His church to be all about? Well, serving, of course. A serving church is what makes a great church. We walk in the footsteps of Jesus when we serve, as we serve Him, as we serve one another, as well as the world around us. First we serve Him. We serve Him out of love for Him. We serve because He first served us. Our service is grateful, obedient, responsive living to our master Jesus Christ, and we serve Him by serving one another in the church. There are so many ways to be doing that. The possibilities are just enormous. Even today, with this dangerous pandemic going on around us, we can still be servants to one another. We serve one another by faithfully checking in with one another, even when we perhaps can't worship together as we're used to doing. We lovingly keep in touch. We keep tabs on one another, we hold one another accountable, and so on. And when we are able to be together, and I know some churches are able to open up now with some limitations, then we serve when we wear our masks around one another and practice good social distancing in order to protect others around us from getting sick. It's our way of saying to one another that we care. That's a given for us as Christians who are commanded to love one another as Christ loved us. And we serve by sharing what we have with those who have lost jobs and income during this terrible time, we generously help them out in their times of need we give of ourselves. I was touched recently by a Facebook post from a friend of mine in my former congregation and it said, "If you are someone that's needing financial help, please call me. I want to help you in whatever way I can." That touched my heart. We also pray for one another's protection and

welfare and spiritual growth and for ministry opportunities for one another. These are ways of serving. And of course, those of us who live in our own households together are practically feeling on top of each other some days. We're living so close with one another 24 hours a day now, as some even work from home and parent at the same time. It's hard and challenging, and it can make us depressed and cranky. Therefore, it becomes all the more important to find little ways to serve and show love and pick each other up on a daily basis – to pay attention to one another and to look at one another, listen to one another so no one feels alone.

We can serve in Christ's name outside the congregation and outside of our family as well. Even today with what's going on around us, we can serve by giving of the resources that God has blessed us with. We serve when we give financially to the food shelves and organizations that give food and shelter and medical help to those who are in need and can't help themselves in our area as well as around the globe. There are plenty of opportunities for giving. There's a lot of hurt and hunger going on around us. And we might make meals for ourselves and deliver them to a neighbor or a fellow worker that's been laid off or someone who's elderly and alone. We can call and write cards and provide other acts of kindness in the name of Christ Jesus. I've seen people doing that in the name of Christ.

We serve by showing concern and kindness right in our own little neighborhoods, checking in with our neighbors who are walking by, calling out to them from a safe social distance and asking them, “How are you holding up these days?”, offering to pray with them or pray for them about their concerns. That’s serving. And again, we wear our masks and we practice social distance. We do that out of love for our neighbor. It's a loving action that you do in the name of Christ. And it speaks loudly that I care about you and about your health.

So let's not let the local church be sidelined by anything ever. The prevailing church of Jesus finds opportunities and creatively makes opportunities to keep on serving in Christ's name. It's not complicated. It doesn't have to be, but it makes a difference. And it pleases Jesus, our servant king. And what's the result? Well, our king tells us earlier on in Matthew's gospel, the church that is working at this will shine and bring God glory from others. That's our number one goal, as the prevailing church of Jesus Christ, you know: to do whatever it takes to help others give glory to our father in Heaven; to awaken others to the goodness and grace of God in Christ, through our serving and

through our help in words and actions, moving them towards a savior relationship with Jesus Christ, our king.

Brothers and sisters of the prevailing Church of Jesus Christ, servants of the servant king: there you have it. Let your light shine and keep on serving, in the name of our servant King, Jesus Christ. He's counting on us, and that is what will make for a prevailing church.

Amen.