**First United Methodist Church**

**618 Eighth Street**

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“Kingdom Building: Something Great”

Text: Mark 10:35-45

In 1666 a devastating fire destroyed many buildings in London. One of those was the St. Paul’s Cathedral. Following the destruction, one of the finest architects of the time, Christopher Wren, was commissioned to rebuild the cathedral.

When work began, Wren stopped to see how the work was coming. He first encountered a brick mason and asked him what he was doing. The man replied that he was building a wall. A little further into the building Wren encountered a carpenter and asked what he was doing. He replied, “I am building steps that will complete a fine staircase leading to the choir loft.” Wren continued into the building where he found a third man putting plaster on the wall. As with the other two he asked him, “What are you doing?” The man paused, waved his arms broadly in all directions and said, “I am building a great cathedral.”

It is all about the perspective we bring to a moment. Neither of the first two workers were wrong. They were building a wall and stairs. But the third man saw his work in the bigger context. His work, small though it might have been in comparison to the total work that was going on, was important. Without his work, the cathedral would be incomplete. In his own way, and with the work and support of the others present, this man was indeed building a cathedral. And when it was complete, each of the workers could look upon the finished structure with a sense of pride knowing that they had contributed some important part of the final product. They had all built a cathedral.

The same is true for us this morning. We are all kingdom builders. It is probably not a title you regularly claim, but it is definitely true. Jesus often spoke about the kingdom and pointed to surprising revelations saying, “There it is.” The kingdom was found anywhere kindness and compassion were practiced. The kingdom was found wherever love was shared. The kingdom was found whenever people were working together to bring hope and peace to a troubled world. We may think of it much more humbly…I was helping a neighbor. I was caring for someone in need. It was nothing. But that is not accurate. It was something. It was something great. It was important work to build God’s kingdom.

Let me give you an example. How many of you fed children in need this week? If you were one of the volunteers at Hot Meals this week, you might be thinking back to the children who were present and knowing that you fed hungry children. Or maybe the question makes you think of the everyday meals that we make for children or grandchildren. In those regards you did in fact feed hungry children this week. But let me share some information you may not know.

The United Way of Bartholomew County notes that one in five Hoosier children are food insecure. What classifies one as food insecure is “lacking reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.” So, 20% of all Hoosier children fall into this category. In Bartholomew County, forty percent of all school children receive free or reduced lunches from school. I am grateful that this is provided for our students. Hungry students struggle to learn. Hungry students find it difficult to focus. Providing those lunches is an important part of providing a quality education.

But what happens when school is not in session? What happens during the school breaks? That’s where our church steps in. Last week our HOPE Committee made sack lunches to distribute downtown to children in need. We couldn’t provide lunches to every student in need, but we could do an important part. Volunteers purchased food and then delivered sack lunches in the downtown area to students in need. Our church did that. You did that. The ministries of this church belong to all of us. Some people volunteer, some provide financial support, some pray for these important ministries. But they happen because of all of us. So, if I were to ask, “How many of you fed a child in need this week,” the answer is all of us. We did it together. That is kingdom building! It is important work that we all share in.

Today’s scripture reading is about Jesus encouraging such activities. It is a continuation of the lesson we read last Sunday. The two are related. Just to briefly refresh your memory, a man came to Jesus wanting to know how to inherit eternal life. After some conversation, Jesus advised him to go and sell all that he had and give it to those in need. In his generosity, in the act of sharing, in the joy that comes in helping others, he would find what he was searching for.

So having heard this, one would hope that Jesus’ disciples now have a better understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. But maybe not. Two of his disciples pull Jesus aside. They have a question. And it’s probably not the kind of question they want to ask in front of the others. This is a sensitive question. The preface their question by saying to Jesus, “We want you to do whatever we ask of you.” That is a bold beginning. Jesus seems interested and tells them to proceed.

With boldness they ask their question. They tell Jesus they want to have positions of honor. They would like to sit, one at his right hand and one at his left hand. They are generous enough not to specify which one would be granted which side. They are content to let Jesus decide that. But they want the place of honor. They want to be visible. They want others to know that they are important. Let us sit, one at your right hand and one at your left hand.

As a slight aside, it is worth noting that this story also appears in Matthew’s gospel, but with one notable difference. Instead of the brothers asking for this position of honor, it is their mother who asks on their behalf. Whether it was them or their mother, James and John are ambitious individuals, and they want to make a mark upon the world. They are driven to be great.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t condemn that ambition. He doesn’t tell them that their request is out of line. He responds with patience and kindness.

Instead, he will use this as a teachable moment. They want to be great, so Jesus is going to give them that opportunity. But he will do so by redefining what it means to be great. Greatness isn’t about being famous or recognized or receiving public accolades. Greatness is often very subtle, very quiet, easy to overlook, often missed. I suspect that when you think about the great people in your life, if you were to name them most folks would say, “Who?” But their work made an important and lasting impression upon you. These great people became mentors, examples, guides for how you wanted to live your life.

While James and John asked their question in private, the answer is too important not to share with everyone. So, Jesus calls all the disciples together to hear this information. Greatness, he will tell them, is found in the willingness to serve others. If you want to be great, the path is found in service to others.

Just like the man who came to Jesus wanting to know how to inherit eternal life, this is a radical notion. The man who wanted to inherit eternal life was told to share his wealth, to care for those around him, to be generous in all the ways he could. In a strikingly parallel way, Jesus is now saying that greatness is found in the willingness to be generous in our time and service to others. That makes a difference. That is how one becomes great.

A few years ago, I came upon a reference to Nicholas Winton in a book I was reading. By the age of 29 Nicholas had become a successful stockbroker in England. He was planning a skiing vacation in Switzerland when a friend persuaded him to visit Prague instead. The friend urged him to come there to help children who were being orphaned. There was a fear for the safety of these children because they were Jewish, and this was during the early years of Nazi expansion. Winton visited and then organized a rescue called kinder transport. With quiet humility, he was able to rescue and relocate more than 650 children. Although he was responsible for their safe transport to England, Nicholas never met any of them.

He never talked about what he did. When the war ended, he married and had a family of his own. He never told anyone about rescuing children during the war. It wasn’t until the 1980’s when his wife was cleaning things in the attic that she stumbled upon one of his journals filled with the names of the children he had rescued. He encouraged her to throw the journal away saying it was nothing important. Thankfully, she did not. She contacted a television program that did some research and found out who these children were and how Nicholas had been responsible for their rescue.

In 1988 they did a documentary about Winton’s life. After telling his activities, the announcer mentioned that Mr. Winton was in the audience that day. He stood quietly to acknowledge the polite applause. The announcer had a further surprise. He told of one particular child Winton had assisted. He turned to Mr. Winton and said, “She is seated beside you.” It was the first time he had met one of the people he had assisted. The two embraced. When the tears and applause had subsided, the announcer then said, “If there is anyone else in the audience who owes your life to Mr. Winton, would you please stand.” Everyone stood. They had packed the room with the survivors and their families. Tears and applause again filled the room. It was a public recognition of what he had done so quietly and humbly. He was a great man. Great because he had been willing to give of himself in service to others, in this case total strangers.

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be great among you must be willing to serve.” This is how the Bible defines greatness. And it is within the grasp of each of us. Because all of us can serve, all of us can be great. There are no exceptions. No one is excluded. This is a room filled with greatness.

And what is true for us as individuals is equally true for us collectively. We are doing great things as a church. A lot of that greatness is very humbly and quietly done. But we are achieving greatness because we are putting ourselves in positions to serve one another. In early December neighbors in need will receive a basket of food for the holidays. Working together with other churches and businesses in town, we are making a difference in the lives of those in need.

Thanks to your generous gifts to the Love a Child campaign for our preschool, there are about a dozen children attending who might not otherwise be able to afford to attend. But we believe in education. And we believe in a healthy start. And we believe that everyone should have a chance to succeed.

Thanks to Shana’s leadership, the youth have been serving hot meals once a month. And what they have noticed are the children and youth who come to eat. They have decided to make care bags to give to the children and youth who attend. It might seem like a little thing, but to the recipient, it may mean the world. Someone noticed me. Someone cares. I am important.

Earlier this year, I received an unexpected phone call. The woman began by saying, “I want to tell you what one of your parishioners did.” I wasn’t sure whether this was going to be good or bad. She said that her husband had died last winter. It was very unexpected. But this member came by shortly after the death to bring some food for her and her family. And then she kept checking on her. The woman wanted to convey how much this had meant to her in her time of need. And I suspect that if you were to ask that member, she would probably downplay the significance of what she did. “I just brought a casserole.” “I just made a few phone calls.” It was nothing big. But it was. And it meant so much to the recipient that she wanted to tell others how much she appreciated it.

Simple acts. Quiet deeds. Humble gifts of service. They seem small, even insignificant. But they matter. They are life changing. Together, we inspire one another, we challenge one another, we bring out the best in one another.

Jesus didn’t discourage his disciples ambition. But he did redirect that energy into important actions. He redefined what it means to be great. Greatness is found in service to others. With God’s help and working together we are building a cathedral, we are building a kingdom, we are building something great…as individuals and as a community of faith.