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“The Greatest Saviour for the Greatest Sinners”

Text: Luke 22:24-30; 2 Corinthians 4:7-10; Proverbs 3:1-8

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We don't know much about the apostle Bartholomew, who we commemorate today. Not many of his words or deeds are recorded for us in Holy Scripture. Tradition says that after our Lord's death, resurrection, and ascension, Bartholomew went up into the region of Armenia and proclaimed the Gospel there. And that for that he was rewarded with “flaying,” which is being whipped until you basically have no more skin, and then he was perhaps crucified after that.

But Bartholomew had come to know and believe that though the enemies of Christ could kill him, they could not take his life. Though they take his skin, he could say with Job: “*I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. **And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold***” (Job 19:25-27a). Like his fellow apostles, he testified in both word and deed that death had been defeated by Jesus. For him, for you, and for all.

And when that's true, then so are the words we heard from St. Paul today: ***We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.***

Death and life so close together, for those in Jesus. Our bodies are dying, wearing out, decaying each day, and yet we know that at the same time we have already begun to live in the gift of everlasting life. Life that will last forever, beyond the reach and grip of death. For that gift, that life, was already given to you in your baptism and so you have it already now, not just some time in the future. And so the death you will die is His death, ***the death of Jesus***, as Paul said. That's the death you are carrying around - a death that has already been defeated. And the life you live is His life, ***the life of Jesus***. That's the life you have - and so a life that will have no end. So it is not one or the other - *are you living or are you dying?* For the Christian on this side of eternity, the answer is simply yes. And that's the great confession we have, and get to proclaim to the world. In word and deed. In how we speak, and in how we live - *and die* - in that faith. As Bartholomew did.

But Bartholomew did not always speak and live that way, just as we do not. He had to learn, or perhaps better to say: to have that faith *worked in him* by the Holy Spirit. For while we do not know many of his words and deeds from Holy Scripture, this we do

know, from the Holy Gospel we heard today - that he was involved, with the others, in a *dispute as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest*. Or in other words, they didn't want to be *jars of clay*, as St. Paul described us, but jars of gold.

Now, we're not told if Bartholomew was arguing for himself or if he was politicking in the cause of one of the others, perhaps Peter or James or John, but in any case, greatness talk is not faith talk. The desire for greatness and faith do not go together. For faith clings to Jesus. Faith points to Jesus. Faith lives **in Jesus**. The desire for greatness is living not in Jesus and finding life in Him, but living in the world, finding life in the world, and clinging to the world. The desire for greatness points to and is all about me.

Which doesn't mean a Christian cannot be great in the eyes of the world. They can and have been. You can probably name some. But that is greatness borne of service and not of fame sought. For Christians know that all talk of "the greatest" starts and ends with one name: **Jesus**. And that any greatness that may be attributed to a man comes from Him and leads back to Him.

But that's hard - no, really, impossible for us, who are saint and sinner, believer and unbeliever, at the same time, to be all about Jesus and live in Him all the time. Especially when greatness and praise *does* come your way. For just when you think you got it, that you're doing okay, that you've learned something and are making progress, the devil comes along and knows exactly what lure to use to lead you astray, what wire to use to trip you up, or what burden to use to beat you down.

Or if he doesn't do that, he'll instead pat you on the back and whisper in your ear that you really are the greatest - or should be. Just look at how good you're doing! And you'll believe it. You want to believe it. You want to be praised and known, too. To be not clay but gold . . . or at least silver or bronze.

So, for example, take some of the words we heard from Proverbs earlier. There is a very well known verse there: ***Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*** And if you're like me, you often think: I can do that. I should be able to do that. I just need to try a little harder.

But the problem is that little word "all." 100%. And we who are both saint and sinner, believer and unbeliever, cannot do anything 100%. So here's the reality. Listen to this little poem written by a friend of mine who used to be a pastor, and tell me if it's not spot on. If it doesn't so astutely capture the greatness-disputing of the disciples. If it doesn't so frightfully reveal what's so often lurking right under the surface of our hearts . . .

Lord, Thee I love with *half* my heart.
The world has claimed the other part.

I pray Thy name be hallowed, Lord,
But want my name to be adored.
Thy kingdom come, Thy reign extend,
And rain on me wealth without end.
Thy will be done, my lips shall pray
And curse when I don't get my way.
I thank Thee for my daily bread,
But cakes and steaks I crave instead.
My million sins forgive, forget,
While I collect a one-cent debt.
From tempting evils keep us free
Unless I find they pleasure me.
Lord, Thee I love with *half* my heart.
My greatness I want with the other part (See end of sermon for attribution).

True? So, instead Lord, *Destroy, reclaim, the other part*. Destroy my desire for my greatness and give me faith, instead, in your greatness. Faith not in my all, but in your "all." For you did all for me.

For Jesus was the one - the *only* one - who trusted and loved the Lord with all His heart; with every thought and every word and every desire and every deed. And so He came down from heaven to love and mercy us with all His heart, all the way to the cross. The greatest become the least. The perfect one become the sinner with our sin to die our death. The one who deserves to be served come to serve us. That we who are great sinners know this only: **that it's not the greatest Christians, but the greatest sinners, who have the greatest Saviour.**

Which does not mean that we can go out and sin and become the greatest sinners so that we can get more forgiveness! St. Paul's answer for that (Romans 6:1) is "*By no means!*" It means the recognition that we *already are* the greatest sinners (or as St. Paul puts it: the chief of sinners), and that for the very reason, we have the Jesus who comes to us still today and proclaims to us Himself and His life and His forgiveness. His greatness, for you, for me, and for all.

Bartholomew and the others would learn that as they saw Jesus on the cross and as they saw Him risen from the dead, but most of all when they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit whose job it is to sanctify us. That is, to make us holy by pointing out the greatness of our sin, and then pointing us to the greatness of our Saviour. That we begin to believe rightly. Dying with Jesus to sin *even now*, including dying to our schemes and desires for greatness, that we may also live with Jesus, *even now*, in His greatness and life.

For still today, for us, death and life are so close together. We talked about this a bit last week in the adult Bible class, there hearing how Luther so vividly described it. For Adam, he said, was living, but with death so close - just an arm's length away; the fruit God had said not to eat. But we, he said, are dying, but with life so close - just an arm's length away; the fruit of the cross given to us to eat and live. The arm of the Pastor reaching out to us with the life and forgiveness found in the Body and Blood of Jesus. Right there. For you. True greatness. That as Job confessed and Jesus accomplished, you live even though you die. Even if flayed, or crucified, or beheaded, or whatever other grisly and gruesome way our satan-inspired world comes up with. You have what is greater. You have the greatest. You have Jesus.

And having Him, then nothing else really matters. Not really. Having Him, we too can be Bartholomews - the later version, not the earlier one! The one counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41). And if you are found so worthy, rejoice! For whether or not anyone ever finds out about your life, your words or deeds, whether or not you receive any greatness in this world, this is promised you: **life in a kingdom that will never end.**

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(From: *The Infant Priest* by Chad Bird [p. 60]. The last line of the poem in the text above is my own addition - his final line being the "Destroy, reclaim, the other part" that was included just after.)