

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Advent 3, 2013
Matthew 11:11-15ⁱ

Part I

Who is considered great? Some consider Steve Jobs to have been great. He was an inventor and a businessman; the co-founder of Apple. He was known for his innovation in computers and tech devices. His innovation, put into I-pods, I-phones, and I-pads, took the industry by storm.ⁱⁱ

Hockey fans consider Wayne Gretzky to have been great. They *even call him* the “Great One.” They do because he scored more points than any other hockey player ever. He did score points at a rate faster than anyone in history. When he retired he held 40 season records and 15 playoff records. What made his great was not his size, but his intelligence and ability to read plays.ⁱⁱⁱ

Then, of course, there is Alexander the Great. He was born in Macedonia. He was tutored by Aristotle until he was 16. At a young age he began to build an empire; and he did it at breakneck speed. By the time he was 30, he created one of the largest empires in the ancient world. In doing that, he never lost a battle. He is considered one of the most successful generals in history.^{iv}

What made each of these men great and others like them? It was achievement and success. Some of it may have come from natural ability; they were born with it. Lots of it came from an inner drive; they put in the hours to be at the top of their game. Then came the payback. They climbed to the top of the political world; athletic world; corporate world.

Now Jesus puts all of this greatness into perspective. He says, “Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptizer” – not Alexander the Great, not Steve Jobs, not the Great One, Wayne Gretzky, but John the Baptizer. John was not a sports icon, not a corporate genius, not a nation builder. John was a messenger; a preacher.

What made him so great in that profession? Jesus explains that “all the Law and the Prophets prophesied until John.” From the fall of Adam until John prophets foretold the Messiah. Century after century, millennia after millennia, prophets told the people Jesus is coming. Then John broke on the scene. All the others said “Jesus is coming.” John got to say, “Jesus is here! He came to take away your sins and rescue you from hell. Trust in him.”^v

Part II

In the world's eyes this does not pass as greatness. The world takes offense at John and the message he preached. It sees the message of sin and grace *as* a weak one; a crutch; a waste of your time. It imagines it to be a message *for* the weak; the downtrodden; the hurting. Marx called it "the opiate of the masses." That is, he considered it like a drug that helps you forget your pain. That it does, but it does not fix the problem.

Man does not need this "drug" this crutch, Marx and the world says. He doesn't because of his natural ability. Man is basically good. He just needs to be prodded in the right direction. Man's inner drive needs to be awakened. He has to dig deep. He needs to go within. There each one will find his greatness; his inner compass; his true self.

Our own sinful self is infected with this way of thinking, too. It thinks that it can be prodded in the right direction; that it can go within to find truth. "I have to feel its right for me; then I know I am a true believer." I can discover the truth for myself; no one can tell me." "I don't need to keep hearing I'm forgiven; I need to know how to do my part." "I have to feel sorry enough; when I am then I am worthy to be forgiven."

That's how the sinful man, our sinful self, included thinks. It believes that it does not need outside help. It prides itself in its own achievement and success. So, when a preacher like John the Baptizer comes along it is an affront. When he says that you do not have what it takes within you for eternity, you need Jesus, then the sinful self chafes. It is offended.

Part III

...and offense can turn violent. It's what happened to John. At the time of John's career, the king was Herod. King Herod did not like what John was preaching. His preaching of sin and grace struck a little close to home. It did because he was living in sin and it felt right for him. He didn't want to give it up. So, he laid hands on John; seized him; bound him and shut him behind bars.

That's where John was at the time of our text. Sometime after our text, King Herod gave orders to his executioners. They were to put John to death. So, upon the King's orders, they ended John's life in a rather violent way. Jesus commented about such actions in our text, "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force."

You and I get a taste of that in life, too. The psalmist expresses it this way for us; my enemies "have fitted their arrow to the bow string; they bend the bow; they shoot in the dark at the upright in heart."^{vi} Their aim is to violate your faith; drain it of its lifeblood, Jesus; and leave you a spiritual corpse. That is, the world

is not your friend. It looks for the opening in your sinful self. It sends its arrows; "That's right, don't trust the word; trust your feelings." You can find the truth out for yourself; you have a logical mind." "You don't need to hear you're forgiven; that gets old fast." "If you don't feel sorry enough, you will never know you are forgiven."

When your enemies have hit the mark, they have seized the day. They have done violence to your faith. They have by leading you to inner feeling; and inner feeling is a poor barometer of how you stand with God. Do you think John felt good in that dungeon? No. He didn't. He felt affliction. When we, like John, are afflicted; when troubles put road blocks in our way; when unforeseen events upset the apple cart; when the guilt of sin presses heavy on us; when pain and sorrow bring us down, the inner feeling we rely on *is not there*. Then we can feel cast off, like the least of all men, like the scum of the earth. Truth is; it is what we deserve for our sin of trusting inner feeling.

Part IV

What we deserve, though, is what *Jesus* got. The world treated him as the scum of the earth; the least among men. It did by doing violence to him. His enemies bound him; beat him with rods; flogged him with whips; nailed him to the cross. They abused him; spit on him; condemned him to death. They violated his life.

That's how it was to be. It was, because God gave Jesus all your sin. He gave him all your scum; all your refuse, as it were. Laden with it, Jesus was "despised and rejected by men."^{vii} He was abandoned and forsaken by God. Jesus truly became the least among men. He put it this way as bore the refuse of the world's sin, "I am a worm and no man."^{viii}

Here we come across a great paradox. Jesus is the least, laden with the world's sin. Yet, *at the same time*, Jesus is the greatest; he is God in the flesh; God incarnate. That's the paradox, the greatest became the least. He suffered the shame of the cross; and in the shame of the cross he did what no man can. He won the victory. Your sins are taken away. Heaven is opened for you. In that, God incarnate is truly great.

One time Jesus was asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God?"^{ix} Jesus called to him and said, "Whoever humbles himself as this little child is greatest in the kingdom of God."^x You know what that is like. When a toddler is hungry, he depends on Mom to make him lunch. When a toddler scrapes his knee, he cries out for Mom. When a toddler gets sick, he needs Mom. So also, when you despair of you own inner feeling; you're own achievement and success; your own greatness; when you depend upon what Jesus did for you; *there* is your greatness. *Jesus* is your greatness.

...and great ones seize the kingdom. That is, you, too, lay hold of it. You do, not in the sense that violates and destroys like the enemies of the church do. No. You lay hold of it in the sense that you will let *nothing* get in the way of the faith. You know that there is no greatness other than Jesus that is worth hold on to. You can have the whole world; be a sports icon; a corporate genius; a nation builder; an Alexander the Great; a Steve Jobs, a Wayne Gretzky, the Great One. You can and that's great, but none of that can get you into heaven. Jesus can. Jesus does. Nothing is worth letting that out of your grasp.

Part V

Jesus concludes today's text by saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Hear what? Hear the message; the message of John the Baptizer. "The Messiah has come. Jesus is here. Repent of your sin. Trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sin."

That's what John faithfully preached; sin and grace; law and gospel. He knocked the props out upon which his hearers leaned; their own empty inner ability. Then he gave them Jesus, who won for them heaven. And look what John got for preaching this message. He got affliction; the executioner. Yes, he did, but today he is in paradise. He is, because the word kept him in Jesus despite what he felt.

The same is true for you and me. Jesus comes to us. He stands in our midst today. He does so in the preaching of the gospel. Speaking of it Jesus says, "He who hears you, hears me." To be sure, that is not where the sinful self looks. It looks to inner feeling; to its own imagined greatness. Yet, Jesus does not come there. He comes to you and me in the external word; the word preached at the pulpit and handed out at the altar. Where the word is heard, there is Jesus; Jesus is the word.

That is what the third Sunday in Advent is *all* about. It is about the ministry of word and sacrament that *brings* you Jesus. Word and Sacrament bring you Jesus *who* has raised *you* from the junk-heap of hell to the gates of heaven; from the scum of the earth to the jewels of paradise; from the least in sin to the greatest in him.

To be sure, in the world's eyes you may *appear* to be the least; and word and sacrament the scum of the earth. Yet, in the preaching of the word are hidden all the treasures of Christ Jesus. By means of that preached word, God puts those treasures in your hand of faith to lay hold of; to seize; to never let go. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" Amen!

ⁱ References to the text (NKJV) will not be cited in the sermon

ⁱⁱ Summarized from

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- ^{iv} Summarized from
 - ^v Paraphrase of John 1.29
 - ^{vi} Psalm 11.3 ESV
 - ^{vii} Isaiah 53.3
 - ^{viii} Psalm 22.6
 - ^{ix} Matthew 18.1
 - ^x Matthew 18.2