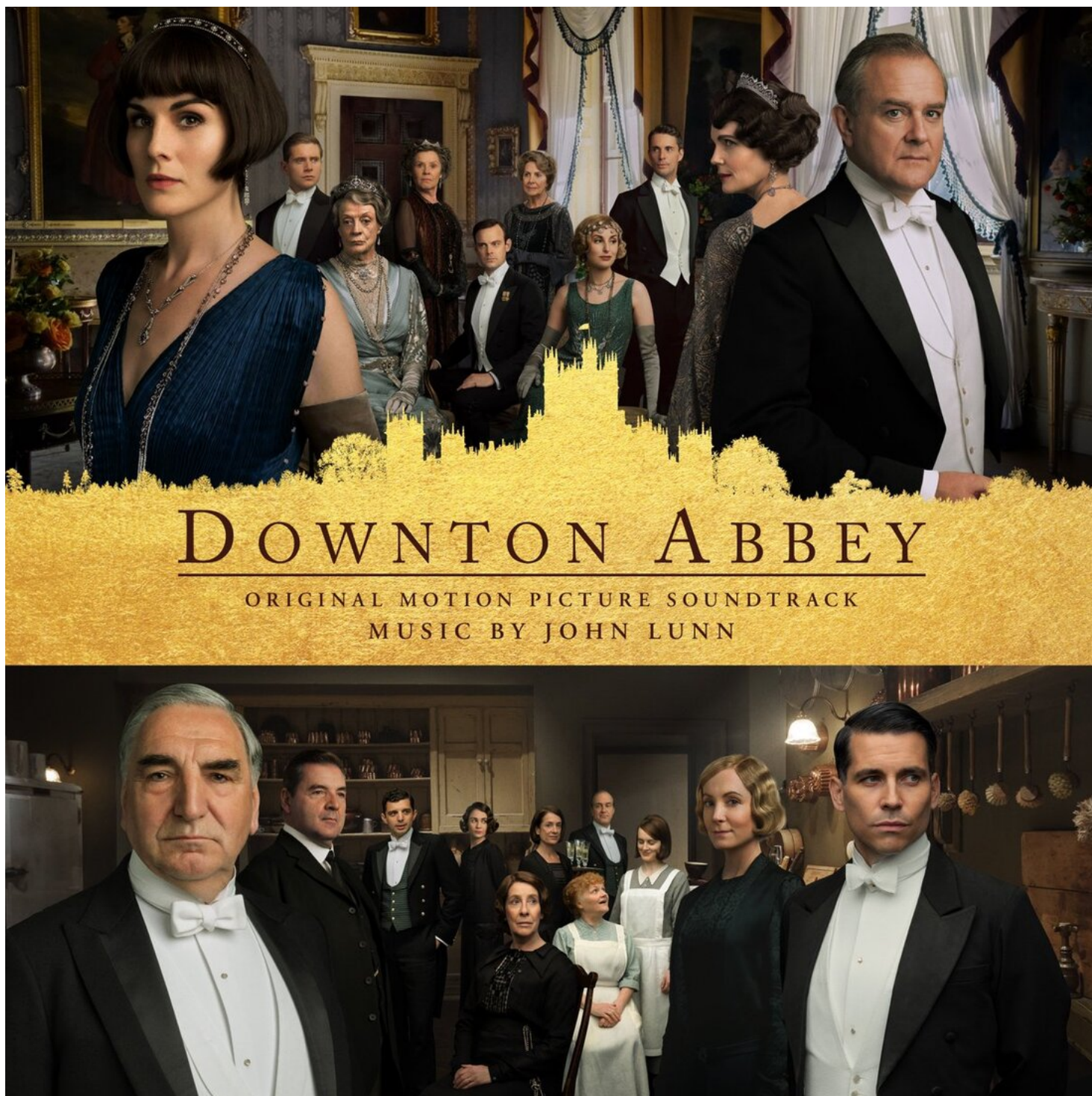


Serving Greatness

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Preaching on:
Mark 9:30–37

I wouldn't mind being great. I think it might be nice. And I don't mean, I wanna be really good at one particular thing. I don't want to be great *at something*. I mean, that's fine too, but I'm really talking about general greatness. I'd just like to be great. It seems like a classical and nobly virtuous thing to work towards, doesn't it?

Nothing too crazy. I don't need you to call me "Jeff the Great" or anything like that—not if you don't want to. But you know that fantasy about the end life, about how you'll be remembered: I hope there's a long obituary with a flattering picture from my youth, a wonderful funeral, lots of people crying, some funny stories, a couple really amazing eulogies. "He was a great man," someone will hopefully say, and the room will hum with agreement, "Amen, yes he was, a great man." I mean, really, that would be something to work towards, wouldn't it? That'd be good. That'd be an honorable life well lived. But the problem is that it seems sometimes like Jesus doesn't like greatness very much.

I mean Jesus is always smacking down the great ones, isn't he? He's always arguing with them, challenging them, telling them to give all their money away. Jesus prefers the widow's two cents to all the riches of the wealthy. He prefers the sinner's table to the tables of the righteous and the well-heeled. He prefers Samaritans to priests, prefers tax collectors to Pharisees, and prefers children to the learned and the wise. What's going on? Jesus, why? What's the problem with greatness?

And then I hear it. Then I hear it, all right. I hear the bickering little whispers of Jesus' disciples on the road. We're arguing. We're novices who Jesus pulled from fishing boats, and from loafing on street corners, and from collaborating with the enemy, but now we're arguing about which of us is the greatest. We're arguing about who will collect the honors, which of us will lead the victorious charge in the battle to come, which of us will sit at the right hand of the Messiah at the end of history. And, yes, I say "us" because as I'm hearing those disciples quarreling, I distinctly hear my own voice in that squabble—wrangling for position, for recognition, for exceptionalism and power—fighting for the place I believe I have earned in the favored vanguard of holiness and righteousness.

And so when we reach the house, and Jesus is sitting there with a child in his lap, he looks at us, and he says, "I do want you to strive for greatness! Of course, I do. But first, you dummies have got to see that you don't know what greatness is yet. You're all mixed-up about greatness. People who argue and bicker about who's greater than who don't have any idea what greatness really is. People who confuse power and prestige for greatness do not yet know what greatness is. There's more greatness sitting on the floor with a child in my lap than there is in all your feverish dreams of glory. Don't seek the greatness that singles you out; seek the greatness that brings you closer to me. Don't seek the greatness that puts you on top; seek the greatness that welcomes God into your life. Greatness is never apart from God! Seek that greatness that mixes you up with God."

There are a few special moments in life when we feel our greatness and God's greatness getting all mixed up. The mountaintop moments of life when the clouds part and the sun comes streaming down

on you in a shaft of light—those experiences that fill you with memories and emotions to last a lifetime. These transcendent encounters where we feel great in the great presence of God are relatively rare.

But Jesus commends to us another way, a simpler way, a more down-to-earth, practical way, something you can do every day—become a servant to the world. Become a servant and your greatness and God's greatness will get all mixed up.

I'll tell you when I'm not a servant. When I'm fighting for control of the TV remote with my wife, Bonnie. It's like I'm fighting for my life—but the shows she watches. I'm telling you: Not a zombie in sight! It's sad.

A few years ago, she was binging through *Downton Abbey* in our little one-room Brooklyn shoebox apartment, so I couldn't escape it. Some of you have watched this show, right? I'm sure you've all at least heard of it. It was this wildly popular historical drama taking place in the early 20th century on a beautiful old British estate. Aside from the aforementioned disturbing lack of zombies in this program, I also didn't like the social divide in the show: The Aristocrats live and play upstairs in their sprawling mansion home, the servants live and work downstairs taking care of the people who live upstairs. I don't find that social arrangement particularly romantic. Doesn't do anything for me. I don't like seeing the world divided into the lower class of servants and the upper class of those-who-must-be-served.

And, so, when Jesus tells me that I must be a servant—the servant of all—I don't like it. You want me to move downstairs? You want me to line up outside as the master motors up in his new auto or whatever? You want me to stand at attention? To be seen and not heard? To fade into the background when I'm not needed? Really, Jesus?

And the difficulties of being a servant go far beyond *Downton Abbey*, right? I mean, just think of who is expected to be a servant here in the 21st century. Aren't women still expected to serve men more than men are expected to serve women? And don't race and immigration status play a big role in who is waiting upon whom? And aren't people in the service industry so frequently exploited and disrespected that millions of them are using the pandemic as an opportunity to escape the industry? And aren't domestic workers facing a plague of sexual harassment and assault in an industry that has very few protections? And aren't the tips that waitstaff depend upon for their living a direct cultural descendent of slavery? Isn't there a dangerous power imbalance baked right into this system? And, Jesus, are you sure it's really great to be a servant?

But sitting there with a child in his lap, Jesus, as he so often does, flips the script. Jesus' servanthood isn't about making the weak serve the powerful. It isn't about making the meek serve the great. It isn't about making the last serve the first. Sitting there with a child in his lap, Jesus tells us that being the servant of all is something like a roomful of grownups welcoming a child. Who has the power? The roomful of grownups do, of course—grownups so powerful they were just recently arguing about who's

the greatest. And who are the most vulnerable among us—in Jesus' day and in ours? It's the children, right? It's not the child who serves the parent. It's the parent who serves the child.

The word Jesus uses when he talks about welcoming a child and welcoming God is the Greek word *dechomai*. *Dechomai* can also more archaically, more accurately be translated into English as "to receive," or even "to pick up." So, when you're a servant to someone, according to Jesus, you're receiving them into your power. Jesus' servanthood isn't like being a butler. It's like being a host welcoming a guest. Or it's like picking up and holding a child. Jesus' version of servanthood is not about serving others to your detriment. It's about serving God's children from your power. Those who use their power to clamber their way to the top of some majestic heap do not know what greatness is. Those who become true servants, who serve from the power that they have been given, are walking Jesus' way to true greatness.

So, Beloved, let's not be afraid to be great. God wants us to be great! And maybe we don't need to worry so much about it all going to our heads. You know, it's not always arrogance that gets in the way of servanthood. It's not even most often, I don't think, egotism or narcissism or megalomania that stops us from being servants.

No, for most of us it's far softer sins: bitterness or hopelessness, lack of imagination or an inability to let go of old habits, pettiness or a little too much comfort. It might not even be your sin. Maybe it's someone else's sin against you: some wound you were given, and the cautiousness, the mistrust, the reluctance and doubt that scarred it over. Maybe this is why Jesus recommends a child to us as a spiritual icon—for their trust, their eagerness, their fresh-faced optimism.

My son, Romey, turned two yesterday, and let me tell you I would not describe this child as humble or as particularly helpful, nor do I think that he spends much time at all considering the feelings of others or the consequences of his actions. On the spectrum of greatness he is, for the time being, a bit of a tyrant. But, when we're at the playground, I have to stick to him like glue, because if I'm standing anywhere within ten feet of him, he'll jump off the top of anything, because he believes so fully that his Dada will catch him no matter what.

But us grownups, we've fallen face-first in the woodchips too many times, we don't have enough trust, enough faith, enough hope to invest ourselves in serving the wellbeing of people we don't much believe in. So, our greatness dies in our low opinion of our neighbors. It's becoming a national affliction.

But Jesus tells us—you, me, everyone of us—that we have the power to serve! And when we serve, Jesus is there with us. And where Jesus is, there is God also. Just take a moment to look around this sanctuary at your church—at the people who make up your church. This is where our greatness begins. It begins right here in service to one another. And as we serve one another we'll get better at it.

One day we'll find we have a whole extra helping of service to spare. And so we will learn, relationship by relationship, risk by risk, to serve more and more of our neighbors.

And won't that be a beautiful thing to see, Beloved? Our greatness, and our neighbors' greatness, and God's greatness all mixed up together in this place? Isn't that what you're here for? Isn't that the greatness that you came here hoping to find?