

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

I am loathe to make any sermon political, and this one is not intended to be that either. But our current president provides me with a good example of a false braggadocio. With him, everything is the best, or the greatest, or the largest, etc. Of course, reasonable people know much of it is not true. “The economy is the best ever!” And surely, right now it is churning along pretty well, but it’s not “best ever.” We’re not even close to the highest growth rate ever. Oh well. That’s the president. He’s a braggart.

We Lutherans aren’t usually thought to have the problem of a false braggadocio. Ours is a false humility. We are very good about reveling in our being “*last of all.*” We like to brag about how we humble ourselves “*before the Lord ...*,” and we like to take pride in the clothes of humility that we don (1 Pet. 5:5). We boast in our humility; we boast in the fact that our “*left hand [does not] know what [our] right hand is doing*” (Matt. 6:3), when that’s just an excuse for our ineptitude or inaction; we boast in the prayers that we say behind closed doors. Such false Lutheran modesty! Repent! Repent of this attitude that masks your selfish ambitions, that really seeks the same greatness as the disciples did. Repent of your boasting in yourselves. Repent of your inaction— in your homes and in the public square, toward the unborn and the infirmed, toward the hungry and the homeless. “*Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep.*” That is, repent! Take to heart what you confessed earlier, and “*Humble yourselves before the Lord,*” you poor, miserable sinners (James 4:8-10).

“*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all,*” Jesus taught. That is, stop trying to exalt yourselves, and let the Lord “*exalt you*” (James 4:10). Boast in the Lord, not in a false double-minded way, but with the pure wisdom from above. Proclaim Him who for us became low and despised, and, by the folly of His cross, shamed the wise of this world and the strong. Christ is the very wisdom from God, and He has become your “*righteousness and sanctification and redemption*” (1 Cor. 1:30).

This is what Jesus was telling the disciples when He taught them a second time, “*The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise*” (see Mk 8:31). Jesus was teaching the disciples that He Himself would become in the eyes of the world the greatest fool, going to a cross, that He might become for us the wisdom of God. He Himself would undergo weakness and poverty and death that He might deliver unto us power and riches and life. He Himself would become the last and the least and the lowest, that we might become the first and the greatest and most exalted. He Himself would become the servant of all, that He might pay the ransom price for our sins, our bitter jealousies, our selfish ambition, our vile boasting that hide

under false humility. The Son of Man would serve us by being “*delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification*” (Rom. 4:25).

The disciples, though, did not understand. Still caught up in the earthly and the unspiritual, this heavenly teaching was but folly to them. And so they reverted back to their thoughts of worldly greatness. Though they had heard Jesus’ teaching, they did not yet understand. Though they had seen His miracles, they did not yet perceive. Though they were following Him, their hearts could not yet imagine what all this meant for them. The Spirit of God had not yet finished revealing to them what the true servant attitude was—that “*Jesus, ... 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*” (Phil. 2:5-8).

And His was no false humility. The Son of God really did become incarnate by the Holy Spirit. The Son of God became that helpless child, an infant, taking on our flesh in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, that He might serve us by redeeming that which He assumed. Jesus Christ really was crucified, died, and was buried, that He might serve us, taking mankind’s punishment—our punishment—unto Himself, and offer to us forgiveness for our sins.

But this same Jesus also was “*highly exalted*” by His Father, who raised Him from the dead and welcomed Him to the heavenly places. This Jesus, having offered up His life as the ransom payment for our sins, really was raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the Father, and was given “*the name that is above every name*” (Phil. 2:9), that every knee would bow in homage to Him and confess Him as Lord, that He might also highly exalt us who humble ourselves before Him. As St. Peter teaches, “*Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you*” (1 Pet. 5:6).

Which is also what St. Paul says: “*have this same mind among yourselves*” (Phil. 2:5) — as that of Christ Jesus. And James, too, “*By [your] good conduct ... show [your] works in the meekness of wisdom*” (James 3:13), humbling yourselves, considering yourselves last of all and servants of all, not boasting in yourselves, but in the Lord, your lives filled with this wisdom from above, which is “*pure, ... peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere*” (James 3:17), so that He might exalt you!

That’s a “*faith working through love*” (Gal. 5:6). Dear friends, let’s not use our humility as an excuse for inaction, for that’s not faithful. After all, servants serve. Rather, let’s seek out places to serve our neighbors: in our homes, in our workplaces, in our church and school, and in the world.

And I know: it seems paradoxical. We have been set free from bondage to sin and been made to be lords and kings. Nevertheless, we are given to be servants of all. That's who we are because of Christ alone and His humble service to us. This is how Luther put it: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none," and yet, "a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (Luther, "The Freedom of the Christian," LW31:344).

Being a Christian is easy, and yet so hard. We are saved by grace through faith alone, and yet a true faith is not an idle faith, but is that "living, busy, active, mighty thing" that serves everyone (Formula of Concord, SD IV:10, 12). We need strength for what lies ahead. Come then and be strengthened. Come to the holy altar to partake of Christ's body and blood, that you may not only receive the fruit of His service in the forgiveness of our sins, as He reckons you great in the kingdom of heaven, but that He may also strengthen you in your faith and your faithful service to others. The Lord preserve us in this faith, neither a faith of false braggadocio or of false humility, but a faith that truly reckons ourselves last of all and servant of all, a faith that rejoices that we have been reckoned by our servant Savior as greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.