

We all grew up reading stories and having stories read to us. Often, they had a moral to teach or a lesson to learn. In particular, I'm thinking of a story that has been shared across many cultures and religions, each with their own unique details, but the settings are exactly the same: hell and heaven.

Imagine that in both places, there was a table set with the most delicious pot of stew. But there was one requirement: you could only use a long spoon for each person. The spoons' handles were longer than a person's arms.

Do you know the difference between the approach of those in heaven versus hell?

The group in hell did all they could to make the spoon full of stew reach into their hungry mouths, but it was impossible because the spoons were far longer than their arms. Hell's group grew hungrier and more and more frustrated and angry.

The group in heaven, however, took a different approach. Instead of focusing on themselves, they each used their long spoon to serve those sitting across the table. In this way, everyone was fed and sated. Heaven's group learned early on to share and feed one another, while Hell's group was greedy and only thought of themselves.

The parable highlights two radically different approaches to life. We all have needs, but when we focus exclusively on ourselves, we all miss out. However, when we focus on serving one another, we all end up receiving what we need. This is how God has established his kingdom to work. *(story adapted from 'Serve As Jesus Would Serve' by Ben Foley, June 30, 2021, sermoncentral.com, original parable attributed to Rabbi Haim of Romshishok.)*

Last month I shared how the disciples were quarrelling among themselves about who was the greatest back at Capernaum. Now, a few weeks later, as they are about to enter Jerusalem, they are beginning to realize that something big is going to happen. Our lectionary omits verses 32 to 34 which precede today's reading and I offer these verses to provide context. Jesus had just announced for the third time his coming suffering, death and resurrection in verses 33 and 34: "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

They still don't get the point, that twice already, Jesus has told them that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. And the subject will be raised again during Passion Week, the disciples will be thinking about it during the Last Supper, the night of Jesus' betrayal.

The disciples have given up a lot to follow Jesus – they left their old lives behind but they still struggling to let go of selfishness and ambition. Today they're arguing about who would get the places of honour in the Kingdom. In fact, the sons of Zebedee, James and John, two of Jesus' closest disciples, are ambitious, and aren't content to wait to see if Jesus would bestow the honour on them. They want Jesus to do them a favour and give them the highest status and connection – at his side. They want earthly greatness, not heavenly greatness. And, of course, this makes the other ten disciples angry and jealous, as they have committed to following Jesus just as much as the two brothers.

Again, Jesus turns this into a lesson. He gathers all the disciples together and turns their ideas of human greatness upside down. The thinking, then, was that those in authority, the Romans and Gentiles, were the greatest and most powerful "lording over their people" as "tyrants."

Jesus doesn't directly tell James and John what they are really asking.

He implies their future using the imagery of sharing his cup and baptism. Jesus is referring to His suffering on the cross, as well as the suffering of many of his apostles in the future after his death and resurrection. He is stating the obvious: those who remain bonded and loyal to him will be treated by the Romans the same way as him. Jesus makes it clear, however, that to have power as a leader is to serve not the elites but the lowest in society and that is his purpose.

How might this look today in the 21st century? We are followers of Jesus, yet we live comfortable lives of service and hospitality, many lending a hand when needed, while others are more active servants in the church.

I think of a fellow parishioner who generously and spiritually gave her time to read and share the Sunday sermon each week with a lovely elder who was unable to be physically present at the services and who has since passed away. I think of my neighbour who spends time with another parish couple, helping with everyday needs. I think of our musical offerings to bring joyful noise. I think of our stewardship servants who help with the practical and spiritual life of the church. I think of the caretaker servants who look after our church building and grounds. I think of the servants who regularly give their time to help the church prosper through yard sales, rummage sales, and, hopefully in the future, bake sales, luncheons and dinners. I think of the servants who communicate with their fellow parishioners through *The Voice* newsletter, sharing their personal reflections, thoughts, and stories.

And, speaking of stories, I began this homily with one and I will end with another:

A man found an eagle's egg and put it into the nest of a prairie chicken. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them. All his life, the eagle, thinking he was a prairie chicken, did whatever the other prairie chickens did. He scratched in the dirt for seeds and insects to eat. He clucked and cackled. And he flew in a brief thrashing of winds and flurry of feathers no more than a few feet off the ground. After all, that's how prairie chickens were supposed to fly. Years passed. The eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. Hanging with graceful majesty on the powerful wind currents, it soared with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings. "What a beautiful bird!" exclaimed the eagle to his neighbour. "What is it?" "That's an eagle, the chief of the birds," the neighbour replied. "But don't give it a second thought. You could never be like him." So the eagle never gave it another thought, and it died thinking it was a prairie chicken. ("The Eagle and the Chicken", VersionPB stories)

Are too many Christians like that eagle, living far below their great, sweet, soaring, massive potential? When God says, "Run," how many walk instead? When God says, "Obey," how many consider their options first? When God says, "Serve," how many are content to be served?

Which path are you on? Are you on the path of true spiritual greatness—the eagle? Or are you on the path of worldly greatness—the prairie chicken." (*adapted from "The Path to True Greatness" by Chris Mueller, April 13, 2014, FBC Media Library*)

Amen

Further Reading:

Whatever Happened to the Twelve Apostles? <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/whatever-happened-to-the-twelve-apostles-11629558.html>

Selected Sources include:

<https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/stewardship.pdf> (*spoon story*)

<https://www.arcamax.com/healthandspirit/religion/godsquad/s-1191693-115819> (*eagle/chicken story*)

<https://versionpb.com/stories/motivationalplusinspirational/eagle-chicken-motivational-story/>

"Healthy Ambition" by Dr. Phillip W. McLarty, www.sermonwriter.com

"Serve As Jesus Would Serve" by Rev. Ben Foley, June 30, 2021, www.sermoncentral.com

"The Meaning of Greatness" by Rev. Roy Almquist, October 17, 2009, www.wmchapel.com

"The Path to True Greatness" by Chris Mueller, April 13, 2014, www.media.faith-bible.net

"With Jesus: Honor and Humility" by Rev. Jo Anne Taylor, October 21, 2018, www.pastorsings.com

Various Sermons, Mark 10:35-45, www.sermoncentral.com

Various Sermons, Mark 10:35-45, www.textweek.com