

Jesus’ disciples were coming off a letdown. In a village just a few miles back, they had not been able to cast out a demon possessing a young boy. They were frustrated because our Lord had commissioned them to heal the sick and cast out demons. But in this case, they were helpless. They could not get it done. They were not so great. Jesus had to salvage the situation. By his great power, he drove away the demon and restored him to his parents.

After that incident, Jesus went on with his disciples through the territory of Galilee. Small talk was common, as they travelled on foot. These men could not easily move past their embarrassment in that village. With egos bruised, they had a hard time coping with their poor performance. It was easier to think about something else, about times that they had done well. They had done some great things, and this led to talk of who had done the greatest things, and, naturally, who was the greatest.

Their conversation was taking a wrong turn. Natural, but wrong. Some distance into their journey, our Lord reminded them he was on another journey of supreme servanthood. Not many days ahead, he would be delivered into the hands of men. He would not resist, and they would kill him. And when he was killed, after three days he would rise again. The disciples did not understand, and they were hesitant, fearful to ask any further about the meaning of this death talk. The greatest disciple would not ask the stupidest question, so better to stay silent.

Now you would think that such a prediction of servanthood and trauma for Jesus would have toned down the disciples flexing. But that’s not what happened. Arriving at Capernaum, settling probably at Peter’s home, Jesus asked, “What were you discussing on the way?” They had been put on the spot. Their misguided argument about greatness rose to the surface. We understand all too well. We may not seek greatness or fame, but we still, even if only subliminally, strive to be first over others.

How do we know this? Because nothing is more aggravating than taking #39 in the lobby of the post office when the person being served holds #26. Or we’re agitated when people get ahead on their personality or their looks or their gender while we work and hone skills and gain experience only to be passed over. “Nice guys finish last,” we grumble, because we want to finish first. We want to be waited on, we want the promotion, the better pay, we want to advance, we want to be recognized. We want to be first.

And here is where Jesus seized on what an educator would call a teachable moment. Precedence over others, striving always to be first, is something he felt he needed to address and address it he does with authority and finality. And this is what he says: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” This axiom is contrary to everything in our selfish world is about, a total reversal of dominant ideas of rank and greatness. How are we to get ahead, how can we progress, how can we win this way: serving all, settling for last place in order to help others be first? How are we going to get to work on time? Giving place to others, we will be late! We will be last.

The disciples were not easily going to let go of their ego needs and aspirations to greatness. They needed a lesson; a clear lesson and Jesus obliges. And what do you know, a toddler running through the room! Jesus grabs the little fellow, sets him in the middle of the disciples, puts his arm around the child and says, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

How disarming. The child is Jesus’ object for learning the lesson of true greatness, becoming last and the servant of all. The child has needs and wants. You cannot ignore his cries. And the little child, once you do for him what needs to be done, once you serve him, will he ever repay or return the favor? Or will the little one forget and just go his way? And there you are, having worked, provided, given, you get no thanks because you dared to place yourself last and the child first. There would appear to be no immediate reward for this action. No immediate payoff; no medal; no wall hanging. But the person who does this for a child honors the Lord and our heavenly Father who sent him. Do you think He will forget?

Greatness in Jesus’ Kingdom takes a servant posture. This goes far deeper than refrigerator magnet wisdom or a meme that you see online. Willingly taking the servant's position is the very fabric of the new world our Lord started to weave when he descended so very low, even to death on the cross, shedding the brilliance of the light of heaven's glory, setting aside all of his power, to assume the form of the suffering servant, reshaping what it really means to live, transforming life from selfish ambition to selfless serving, or to really distill it down, transforming a great life from getting to giving.

On every avenue of life in our communities, at work, at church, at home, is opportunity to gather before Jesus and hear his words, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” It is the way to live, the way to serve, the way to great Christ-likeness.