

“First and Last”

How many of you have been teachers; in particular, teachers in junior high or middle school? Does any of what we just heard in the gospel lesson sound familiar to you? Think about how the disciples act in the story? When I think about it I have to smile for the disciples seem like a bunch of 8th graders.

First of all we hear that Jesus has been teaching them about what it means for him to be the Messiah. He has explained it to them several times prior to now. Yet, as they walk through upper Galilee toward the seaside town of Capernaum he continues to explain. Indeed, the verb tense in Greek implies a continuous and ongoing action. In other words, he is explaining it over and over again, because they are not getting it (there is a reason my professor called them the “duh-disciples). Not only do they not understand but they are afraid to ask him any questions. They are like a bunch of kids who are unwilling to look foolish in front of teacher or their fellow students despite the fact that none of them understands what is being taught.

When Jesus is not teaching them they are arguing amongst themselves. I suppose they are like kids on a school bus headed on a field trip. They are arguing and fussing amongst themselves and think that teacher does not hear it or know what is going on.

When they reach their immediate destination in Capernaum and enter the house where they will stay, Jesus asks them what they have been arguing about. Of course, he knows, but none of them will speak. While the gospel doesn't tell us the reason it is not too hard to figure out that they are ashamed.

They don't understand Jesus' teaching, who he is, and what he is there to do, but they want to be teacher's pet. Therefore, they fuss and dispute about who is number one, two and so on. These guys are acting more like immature middle-schoolers than they are acting like grownups.

Jesus tells them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” They do not understand what he has been teaching about messiahship, they are certainly not going to understand this conundrum. I can see them scratching their heads and perhaps whispering between themselves about this. Knowing how obtuse they are Jesus decides to give them a concrete example.

His choice is brilliant given their childish behavior. Jesus picks up a child and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Jesus is so good with kids. Actually I am sure that was not his intent.

Jesus is picking a child as an example because of the status of children in his society. Honestly, children do not have much more status now. The conventional wisdom about children in the first century was that they were considered non-human.¹ I would argue that was not the case. Rather like children

¹ John R. Donahue, Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, [Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 2002] p 285, “non-human,” “nonentity”

today they did not many rights. For example, we usually do not trust the word of a child over that of an adult. Children are still considered the possessions of the parents. We as individuals and a society are loath to interfere in the way parents rear children. The status of children was the same in first-century Palestine.

In contrast, we have a number of stories in the Bible where parents come to Jesus for healing of a child (e.g. Jairus, the Syrophenician woman). Parents would not go to such lengths if children were non-human and worthless.

Jesus chooses the child as an example because children are dependent on others for food, shelter and protection. Children do not have agency for themselves in the courts or other institutions. Children also cannot do much for an adult. Therefore, if we welcome a child we cannot expect to get something in return. Jesus picks the child as an example of the least.

Jesus is saying to his disciples and to us, "If you want to be the best disciple, go out that door and find the person who needs the most help and has the fewest resources. Help that person. Then find another just like her to help. If you keep doing this over and over eventually you might understand what being greatest means in the eyes of God."

We can start our journey toward greatness with baby steps. First bring a can of food for Seven Loaves each week. Then bring a bag of food, and then a van load. Next volunteer at the food pantry and distribute food to the poor. As we continue to grow we start searching out the people in need. Perhaps he is someone we see along the roadside, or we seek him out under a bridge. Perhaps we visit the recluse in the ramshackle home. We find out how he is doing and bring food or take her to the health clinic. Perhaps we make a place for this person in our home or on our property.

The deeper we go the scarier it gets. It is not warm and fuzzy like Jesus hugging a child. Being a disciple of Jesus is hard work and takes most of us out of our comfort zone. My example is not the only way to become a great disciple. You can explore your own boundaries and edges of comfort.

But don't act like an immature and self-centered 8th grader there are plenty of people doing that already, we see them in the news every day. These are the people who desire greatness and admiration without being willing to do the work or pay the price. Instead, do the Christian thing, do the Jesus thing. Touch the untouchable, feed the hungry, help the dirty get clean, and clothe the naked. There is more than enough hurt in this world that needs tending. As St. Theresa of Avila said, "Christ has no body now, but yours. No hands, no feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion into the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world."

If those "duh-sciples" figured out how to do this, we can, too.