

Twenty-fifth Sunday – September 20, 2015

It's no secret that the basic fuel of the lives of many human beings comes down to this: craving power and recognition, showing off titles and awards, getting to rub elbows with the "in" crowd, displaying the latest acquisition, holding on to the latest gossip, having the most "likes" on Facebook, and being morbidly curious about the latest celebrities.

The disciples of Jesus were not so different. Even after all the teachings of Jesus and his abiding example of Kingdom living, they didn't get it. And we find them today arguing about who among them was "the greatest." Who had the power? Who was the top dog? Who had the inside skinny with Jesus?

"What were you arguing about on the way?" Jesus asks them. The disciples became dumb, showing at least enough good sense to be ashamed. It's easy to miss the fact that Jesus did not reproach them. Instead, he gave them the Cliff notes answer to the real greatness: "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all."

It's hard to imagine a more complete reversal of the disciple's values than the living parable Jesus performed next as he gave center stage to a little girl. (True, the original language does not specify gender, but Jesus was out to shake them up, and using a girl child would have doubled the impact of his gesture.) The disciples wanted to know who was the greatest, so Jesus showed them: 26 inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. God's agent. The last, the least of all. Holding that little girl, Jesus identifies himself with her, the most powerless, the most vulnerable one in the room. It was a living parable the disciples would ponder for years to come.

We shouldn't be too harsh with the disciples of Jesus. After all, Jesus was reversing all their expectations of God. The God he spoke of was not the victorious warrior but the suffering shepherd, one who calls rather than coerces. The disciples may not have understood completely then what Jesus was doing, but they remembered it enough to be sure that this scene was related in 3 of the 4 Gospels.

The foundation for today's gospel is humility, a word that for many of us has a negative connotation: a doormat who allows others to walk all over them. But the best Christian understanding of humility is more realistic and even life-giving; the humble person is one who recognizes his or her true place in the world. A good example of this is the T-shirt that sports an image of the Milky Way with a tiny arrow and the words "you are here."