

“Called to be selfless”

A gospel reflection from Brian Wigger, Pastoral Associate

There is a well-worn cliché that all of us are familiar with because it's part of our daily life, first come, first serve. Christ, on the other hand, gave us a principal in this weekend's Gospel that we hear as come last; serve first. A complete reversal of the way most of us are accustomed to think. And we get the impression that He would like this principal to become part of the daily life of all disciples of all ages. So often what our civilization says and what our Religion says are two different standards.

We know for a fact that people enjoy winning. That's not so bad of itself. Much of life is based upon competition, and competition can very often be a healthy thing. Competition can motivate people to higher performance. I doubt whether Christ would opposed to us trying to improve ourselves throughout life. But there seems to be a breaking point where we have to weigh the merits of being #1 with the directives Christ gave us about serving people. This breaking point doesn't just occur in one place in the New Testament; it occurs all over the New Testament.

The Apostles had the same thing on their mind that we have sincerely, I might add, on our minds in a very competitive world: success, prosperity, recognition, power, prestige, importance. It must have puzzled them greatly when, to illustrate his point, Jesus set before them as a model a small child. I do not think that He was advocating that grownups should try to return to childish ways. He was only identifying Himself and His followers with a Child.

We can't help wondering why so curious an example. Back in those days, children were meant to be seen and not heard. Adults looked down upon them because children were not considered worthwhile persons yet. In those days children contributed nothing to the economy. Children were expected simply to be learners— that was all. Children were expected not to be preoccupied with worry about taxes or jobs or the cost of food or social and even moral issues. Interestingly enough, in the language Christ spoke, the Aramaic dialect, the word for “child” and for the word “servant” were the same. A child was regarded as a servant and servants were regarded as children.

So we might be asking ourselves, “What was Christ telling us to be”? The context of this Gospel incident seems to lend us to the belief that Jesus saw his followers not a subservient role necessarily but in a servant role. He would prefer that Christians not be overwhelmed by the force of power struggles. He preferred that adult Christians not argue like the Apostles did about who was most important. The corporate or social economic ladder would not have mattered greatly to a child. But a child wants to be loved and will gladly give love in order to be loved. A child will serve and even suffer in order to receive love. And that appears to be what Christ was getting at in our Gospel this weekend. If you want to be important in the eyes of God, you will have to start by being humble and willing to serve.

That is a lesson which can easily slip by us. A Christian person can be important in the eyes of the world, but such a person remains as teachable, as loveable, as humble in God's eyes as he or she can be. Our importance from God's point of view lies not in our ability to have people wait upon us, but our ability to wait upon others. Being a child of God means that I must serve, and not worry all the time about winning. We win best when we have learned to serve the rest.