

The gospel story for today is human, interesting and points to an almost universal human need to be first among others. It seems to me that being self serving is the natural human condition, and good manners are only the result of a socializing process that comes from getting whacked, physically or verbally, when you try to shove your way to the front of the line, whatever that line might be.

When I lived in Europe, I took perverse delight in watching people jump in front of others in line, to buy their train tickets, or get whatever else they wanted. In our American culture, we have learned to get ahead in different but equally obnoxious ways; again, a process of socialization. People just like to be first. We are like siblings fighting to be Mom or Dad's favorite. When I was in college, including graduate school, I used to really cram hard for exams when I knew that the professor graded on the curve, not just to make good grades but to mess up the curve for the rest of the class. There is a human need to be first.

Now, if this is hitting home and making you feel bad, that's life. I admit that it makes me feel bad to remember my college exam antics. However, we need to realize that we're in good company. Even the disciples did it. That is the point of the Gospel this morning. James and John, two of the three top dogs in the disciple pack to begin with, jockey for position in, of all things, the Kingdom of God. Not only are they jockeying for position, they are doing it at the expense of their friends and brothers in Christ. It's classic. James and John pull the Lord out of earshot of the others and hit him up for the favor. "When you get back to Heaven, Jesus, let us have the top two jobs in the Kingdom." Apparently, selflessness was a steep learning curve for them, just like it is a steep learning curve for us. Remember that this incident follows, just by weeks, an earlier event where Jesus caught the whole bunch of them arguing among themselves about who was going to be first in the Kingdom of God. The Lord explained things to them then; it just didn't take.

The good news in this story, though, is Jesus' response to James and John. Note the gentleness. Note the love. Note the compassion. There is no rebuke. There *is* understanding. And then, Mark tells us, Jesus began to teach, not just James and John, but all of the disciples, and through the words of Mark's gospel, he teaches us, too. In God's world, greatness is measured in service and servanthood. We've heard this theme many times. Those who are first in the eyes of God are those who put the love of God and neighbor above all else. This may not be the way of the world we live in, but we are told to place the highest value on the Kingdom of God and to do our part to bring the Kingdom of God to others.

We live in a world defined by competition and performance. These are not necessarily bad things. Competition and performance often produce results that are good for society.

We want competition in the marketplace. We want the best, most competent of individuals, to rise to the positions of leadership in the industrial world, in government and in the church. Have you ever thought of the relationship between the words competence and competition? It is no accident that they share the same root word. Our competitive world is not a bad world, but God calls us to a better world, the Kingdom of God. The Bible tells us that Jesus came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. This is our calling, too, as disciples.

Jesus calls us to a new and different way. He calls us to be counter-cultural. He shows us a different way of being, a way that values others in the same way that we value ourselves. Our culture tells us that if we are not the best, we lack worth. Jesus says our true worth lies in relationships: with God, with each other, and with the work we are called to do, work done in the name of God. We find our real worth when we are faithful to these things. When we are faithful disciples, we are released from the competitive competition that is so very dehumanizing. So, we are not to “lord it over” one another, but to see each other as God sees us all. Our brothers and sisters are the children of God, just as we are. All have value; equal value. All must have dignity; equal dignity. St. Paul has said that we are all one in Christ Jesus, whether we are male or female, black or white, Asian or Caucasian, rich or poor, straight or gay, educated or uneducated, we are all children of the one God. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. We have no priority over each other. We have no divine right of place in this world or God’s world. And, at the end of things, if there is to be a judgment or a ranking, there is only one judge and his rulings are supreme. The judge of all is Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*