

25th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Discipleship and Service”

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Jesus asked his disciples, what were you arguing about on the way?” They remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way which one of them was the greatest. Of course, from popes to pastors, we expect a lot from those who minister to us, do we not? We expect so much from our ministers, be they lay ministers or ordained ministers, that it is easy to get in the habit of judging who was the most popular priest we ever had, or who was the most popular lay minister we ever had, who is the best teacher I ever had, etc. Even among us priests, we can get into the habit of judging each other and it is never our shiniest moment. At work, at school and at home it is easy for anybody to play these games. “I am a better person than that goof bag”. The Gospel today challenges us to stop sizing each other up in that way. Jesus asks the disciples, “What were you arguing about on the way?” The Gospel says they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves who was the greatest.

And it is all very silly. And yet it happens every day, sometimes at work, at school, or at home. Perhaps not always directly, usually indirectly, perhaps passive aggressively, we can tell ourselves, “I am better at my job than that moron. I am a better student than that loser. I am a better son or daughter than my sibling. I am a better parent than my spouse.” “Huskies are clearly better than Cougars”. Politicians never play these games right? I love St. James’ comment in our second reading, “Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice.” How often do we see that at work, school and even at home? And so, Jesus asks the disciples, “What were you arguing about on the way?”

Jesus is challenging us to avoid playing egotistic games with ourselves. Jesus says, “If anyone wishes to be first, they shall be the last of all and the servant of all.” What this means is: we would be better served in our relationships with the difficult people in our lives if we lifted them up in prayer, contemplate the little ways we can help them along to their salvation, rather than self righteously inflating our egos, thinking we are so much better in the eyes of God. How much better life would be for us and for our relationships if we realized that our lives are not about us, but about Jesus?

Of course, Jesus taught by example, didn’t he? He came to serve not to be served. He came to heal our infirmities, even die for our sins. During the last supper, the master knelt to wash his disciples’ feet commanding them to do likewise with those they meet. When you think about St. Vincent de Paul, that is what he did. He washed people’s feet following the Lord’s example, making other people more important than himself. Jesus indeed serves us by offering his very self as food in the Eucharist, died in our place on the cross, and rose again so that we too might have everlasting life.

Do you want the quickest method to make sure everyone around you hates you? Make yourself more important than them. If you want people to dislike you, just talk about yourself and your accomplishments *ad nauseum* whenever you are around them and be disinterested in other people's lives. This will guarantee that no one will like you. Who wants to be around people like that, raise your hand? Do you want the surest way to have a lot of friends and people who love you? Make other people more important than yourself. Celebrate other people's successes rather than your own. Become more interested in other people's lives. Make other people's needs more important than your own. You will end up with more friendships than sand on the seashore. There is a lot of wisdom in Jesus' words today, "If anyone wishes to be first, they shall be the last of all and the servant of all". He led by example by placing us as more important than himself. This is why the greatest of us all is the one who does the same.

And so, we can ask ourselves, who is that one person in my family that I can serve in the way Jesus is challenging us this weekend? What does that look like when you get home today? Who is that one person at work or at school we need to serve better as a disciple of Jesus? Who is that one person in our neighborhood or community? It sounds like a simple challenge, but it isn't an easy one in the times we live in. I think most people in the world have been trying to navigate these times with a certain measure of depression. I wonder if the "golden rule" these days could be "I will give people the same slack that I want others to give me". This past year, and indeed I imagine in the coming months, we are all going to continue to have our moments. The only way through these times is allowing Jesus to carry us by the measure we carry each other. This is why I think this Gospel reading comes at a good time. The more we see ourselves as the one who serves rather than the one to be served, the more we grow closer to Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life.