

It's a good thing that the evangelists have recorded the response of the disciples to Jesus's person and teaching because their foibles and failures are just like ours, and somehow that can be comforting. This week we see the disciples arguing about who was the greatest. We cannot be too self-righteous in condemning them because jockeying for position, for power, for recognition, for glory, is something we carry with us, something we do virtually every single day.

It starts from the very beginning, right back to when we are infants, which - is why the next few verses in which Jesus is talking about children is paradoxical. Although they are certainly vulnerable, small children are not quite as guileless or as innocent as they have been portrayed.

Think about it. Aren't children always vying for attention from their parents? Psychiatrists have long known that birth order has a huge impact on development. If you were the older child, you were the undivided object of your parent's attention. Once your siblings began to arrive, you might have found yourself resentful about being displaced because your parent's attention was redirected to each additional child. As one guilty of the charge, my parents used to say that after seeing my first younger brother for the first time I said, "Now that we've seen him, can't we have the doctor put him back?". Conversely, as the oldest you might have felt pleased about being given responsibility for looking after your siblings, giving you the power to boss them around, or perhaps you had a tight bond with your mother or father that none of your other siblings shared.

The youngest child, on the other hand, may end up with more of his or her parents' attention and be allowed to get away with things that had not been the case for the older children. The older siblings may come to resent the favoritism showed to the youngest child and the youngest child may learn how to take advantage of their position as the "baby" of the family.

I am not saying anything about middle children because they tend to be caught in the powerless middle, becoming one of those vulnerable ones that Jesus is telling his disciples to welcome.

Jockeying for position in the family doesn't end with childhood and rivalries may continue well into old age, but as we age, competition for position expands to include the outside world. When you were in school did you ever get to clean the chalkboard and erasers after school was done? (Do they still use chalkboards?) How about the expression "teacher's pet"?

Sometimes this jockeying is explicit: in sports, naming team leaders and most valuable players, in age-old rivalries between schools, in class ranking, in crowning the prom king and queen (or monarchs as the case may be).

In the workplace, competition may or may not be visible and becomes less acceptable unless we are in sales. Sales contests are legendary and so are the trick that reps will pull to reach the top of the list. You've also probably heard the expression "brown-nosing" or "sucking up", to describe manipulating your way into a special relationship with your boss to get ahead? On the positive side, however, we develop our skills to get promoted because we want to get succeed, moreover, we are culturally programmed to strive for success, to become more wealthy than our parents, our siblings, our neighbors, our co-workers and so forth.

We enter politics or other organizations to exercise power and control, to become the "decider."

As a nation the pressure to dominate is powerful. Don't we speak about America as number 1???"

If you have been reading or hearing the news, you know that France has withdrawn its ambassadors to the US and Australia because of the nuclear submarine manufacturing agreement that we have signed with Australia. In effect, Australia has reneged on its deal with France and French manufacturers will be out some 60 billion dollars because of the switch. While I certainly can't outline the pros and cons of this deal, the bottom line is that we have damaged a long-term relationship that could have global consequences.

Therefore, we can consider the disciples' squabble about who was the greatest an unfortunate reflection of human nature, a key aspect of our ongoing struggle to avoid sin.

The bar has been set high. When Jesus hears about the disciples' argument he doesn't stand for any nonsense and tell them straight out, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35) His directive goes against everything we are conditioned to do or to believe and yet it is a classic example of the reversals that operate in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus modeled what he commanded for us, his first pronouncements were that "The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15). Jesus became incarnate, leaving his god-hood behind. He became mortal to live and die amongst us, to suffer rejection, humiliation, and betrayal, hunger, thirst, torture, and death, to demonstrate that "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35) But that was not the end. He is first of all, he was resurrected and has returned to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, not for his own glorification but because he defeated the power of sin and death for us all. Jesus served us, he became last for us, and in so doing became the greatest of all.

If we take this message to heart, we might hear our inner-voice asking where will we find motivation, how will we define success, how will the world work – especially when not everybody would play by those rules?

The challenge for us when we take Jesus' message to heart, is to hold that tension, to ask each and every time, do we need to win or does our winning negatively impact the other person (or country's) survival?

It may start with the small things, letting someone else get ahead of you when you are in line, letting another car merge when you don't want to wait, giving more generously when you are asked for money, resisting the urge for vengeance, refraining from crowing on Facebook, listening to the stories of those who are different from us and responding with compassion rather than judgment. Sometimes we may be rewarded with a thank you, or different behavior, other times we will just have to take comfort in having triumphed over our own inclinations ... even when it means sacrificing our own self-interest.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:35)