



## ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday 2021

**Jesus' disciples wanted to succeed.** Well, don't we all?

It's *football season* again, and already the jockeying for position in the polls has begun. Whose team is number 1, who will make the playoffs, who will be the champion? **It's all about winning, coming out on top, being number 1.**

During *Political races* we are besieged by daily prognostications about which candidate is the frontrunner, which one is leading in the all-important race for raising the most money, which one will capture the sound byte on the daily news today? **It's all about winning, coming out on top, being number 1.**

The talk *at the office* is centered on the announcement of the new executive position that has been created in the company. Rumor is that one of the middle managers will ascend to that coveted spot. So the race to the top of the corporate mountain has been on full-tilt by those managers who think themselves candidates for the position, complete with obvious brown-nosing, insane workaholic hours, and underhanded efforts to mar the reputation



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of the other competitors for the job. **It's all about winning, coming out on top, being number 1.**

We all know this drill, this frenetic clawing for position and prestige. It is a well-worn plot that shows up in our school playgrounds, our family relationships, our business culture, and our entertainment interests. *And, no wonder, who wouldn't want to be the top of the class, the leader of the pack, the occupant of the plush corner office?* Our culture tends to reward *overachievers, aggressive competitors* who will stop at nothing less than greatness and dominance.

**And this drive to be the greatest, to be number 1, is *not* a new phenomenon, *nor* confined to our American culture.** It is as old as the sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel in the Garden of Eden. And so we are not surprised to read in our Gospel lesson today that the disciples of Jesus had been arguing among themselves about which one of them was the *greatest*, which of them was the *leader*, or perhaps which of them was



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Jesus' *favorite*. This is the typical argument at the water cooler, the sports pub, and the family dinner table in any society.

**It's disingenuous to pretend otherwise.**

**"False humility" says it doesn't matter if you succeed or not.** What it comes down to is that the sin of the disciples in today's gospel is ***not ambition***. It's ***not*** wrong for them to want some way to measure that they're acing this discipleship thing. Who wouldn't want to be the *best* apostle? **To be *first* in the Kingdom is worth striving for.**

But like those first followers of Jesus, some among us – ***in fact all of us at times*** – still haven't learned *that greatness, strength, power, and domination* mean something ***radically different*** when you call yourself a Christian.

**So what does it mean to be "number one" for a follower of Christ?** Jesus tells us, "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*" **Doing-for-others, serving others, humbly giving oneself to make other lives better is how one attains number one status.**



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My friends, is such a transformation possible? The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said that what Jesus wants are *followers*, not *admirers*. He's right.

**To "admire" Jesus without trying to change our lives does nothing for Jesus or for us.** Yet how exactly does one ***follow*** Jesus? Can the likes of us who pride ourselves on our physical health, mental prowess, business acumen, relational savvy modulate from being men and women who define greatness in terms of ***power*** to being great in terms of ***humility***?

Does Jesus believe we can make such a radical change?

Apparently he did. **He believed his proud, self-centered disciples could do it and, I think, he believes we can as well. But how?**

The great psychologist Abraham Maslow developed what he called a "*hierarchy of needs.*" And our first need is for food and shelter.

Core to being human is surviving. **Sad to say for most of us, food and shelter soon changes to position and power.** Like animals at a feeding trough, we nuzzle the weak out and, being



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strong, devour as much of life's nourishment as we can. The quest for more seems never to be satisfied.

**Changing our way of living to our Lord's way of living requires us to re-define survival to include others.**

You see, the Gospel of Jesus Christ

- *indicts our selfishness;*
- *it requires us to relocate our center of gravity,*
- *to move from the prison of selfishness to a world of others,*
- *from egotism to sisterhood and brotherhood.*

**It asks us to believe that the only real power in the world is the power of love, expressed in service.** Once you accept Jesus' blueprint for living, the whole world no longer revolves around you, your needs, your gratification's. You'll have to revolve around the world; seeking to bandage its wounds, loving the dead into life, finding the lost, wanting the unwanted, and leaving far behind all selfish concerns.



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The disciples of Jesus could find greatness just as He did, by reaching out and serving the poor, the powerless, the weak, the unimportant, the rejected, the lonely, the sick, and the aged.

My friends, today's Gospel Jesus gives us a lesson that we often **fail** to grasp. **How many of us, if we were asked to describe the path to success in life, would answer with the words of Jesus our teacher, "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all."**

Let's not miss the child being held in our Lord's arms. Number one status is a reality that comes to those who have a child-like trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Children trust that their needs will be met by their parents.

**What if being number one boiled down to living in such a trusting, almost naïve relationship with Jesus Christ, that we could freely serve others knowing that our needs have already been met?**



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Christian life is not a spelling bee, or a sports competition, or a version of the reality show, *Survivor*. **What if winning in life actually meant making others number one because we knew in our soul God had already claimed us all for his very own? It's true. It's really true.**

It's a matter of faith. Like the disciples, we too are brought to silence because we cannot accept the meaning of who Jesus is and his mission.

It is perhaps a coincidence that in Mark's gospel the story of the disciples arguing over "*who was the greatest*" directly follows Jesus' revelation of his impending death. But looked at another way, squabbling that follows immediately upon news of a death is an all-too-common pattern when someone dies and his or her heirs quarrel over who deserves the greatest share. Humans often instinctively react to a shock by "*looking out for number one.*" **Jesus, however, instructs his disciples to rise above their ego-preserving instinct and instead devote themselves to selfless service.**



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### **Are we up to the challenge?**

To do God's work in the world, Jesus says that the first "must be last of all and servant of all." *But that's not the end of the story.*

When we enter the kingdom of God, we discover that the last actually become first. **So maybe it is our current world that is crazy and upside-down, not the kingdom of God.**

My friends look at it this way – I tell you this on the authority of the Scriptures: **Christianity can turn us on our heads, but as it does this, it is really setting us right-side up.**