

Would you consider yourself a competitive person? Or maybe I should ask, in what area are you most competitive? Maybe you're competitive in getting the best grades in your class or the best parking spot at work. Maybe you compete to make the best pancakes in your family or tell the funniest knock-knock joke. Humans are naturally competitive. We like to have an edge over those around us.

There was a driven young man in the pre-med program at a competitive college. The summer before his junior year, the young man took a break from his studies to travel to the Far East. He met a guru who questioned his pursuit of success. The guru claimed that the young man's constant desire to compete against others was poisoning his soul. He invited the young man to join him at his retreat center, where all the students loved one another and shared their possessions. So the ambitious pre-med student called his parents and told them he was dropping out of medical school.

A few months later, he wrote a letter to explain his new way of life. His letter began: *"Dear Mom and Dad, I know you weren't happy about my decision, but I want to tell you how it has changed me. For the first time in my life, I'm at peace. Here there is no competing, no trying to get ahead of anyone. This way of life is so in harmony with my inner soul that in only six months I've become the #2 disciple in the entire community, and I think I can be #1 by June."*

It's not so easy giving up the need to compete, is it? There are big rewards for competition in our

culture. Status. Promotions. Paychecks. Bragging rights. But what does competition do to our soul?

A woman wrote in to *Reader's Digest* with a story about her husband's recent golf game. Her four-year-old daughter greeted her husband at the door by asking, "Daddy, who won the golf game? You or Uncle Richie?" "Uncle Richie and I don't play golf to win," he said. "We just play to have fun." Without hesitation, she asked, "Okay, Daddy, who had more fun?" Even little kids learn to keep score. Even little kids learn that life is about winning. But if someone wins, then someone else loses. If someone is first, then someone else is second and third and last.

In our culture, we often base our identity and self-worth on whether or not we are "winning." We judge our value as human beings on how close we are to being "Number 1." But someone is always going to outrun us, outrank us, out-perform us. The greatest athlete on earth may have a lousy marriage. The richest person in the world may be in poor health. Someone always has something we want. The competition never ends.

There's a story of a man who had just sat down at his favorite restaurant and ordered his favorite milkshake. By the time the milkshake was placed in front of him, he needed to use the restroom. So he grabbed a pen and wrote on his napkin, "Property of the world's strongest weight lifter," and placed the napkin under the edge of his glass. Surely no one would steal a milkshake from the world's strongest weight lifter! He returned to the table a few minutes later to find that someone had drunk his favorite milkshake.

The person had also flipped over the napkin and written on the back, “Thanks for the treat!” Signed, “The world’s fastest runner.”

That’s the problem with being a competitive person. You’re always chasing after some other person, after some other record. Someone will always be greater than you. You can waste a lot of energy, and lose a lot of joy, by always trying to stay a step ahead of the other guy.

Of course, Jesus understands our need to compete. He understands our desire to be the greatest. Fear and pride drive us to put our needs first, and to compare ourselves to others. But while fear and pride may drive us to achieve great things, but they also steal away the joy of achievement, and drive us further away from God and from others.

And that brings us to our gospel for today. Jesus asks questions of us. He doesn’t ask because he is ignorant. Jesus asks us questions so we will be honest with ourselves. Sometimes when you say something out loud, you realize how crazy it is. So Jesus asked his disciples, “What were you arguing about on the road? But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.”

Think about that - hilarious, isn’t it? The disciples had seen Jesus feed a crowd of thousands, heal the sick and disabled, and heal a boy who was possessed by a demon. And yet they were arguing over which of *them* was the greatest in the group. That’s like bragging to a famous chef that you finally learned how to make toast or telling a Navy SEAL that you fought off an attack from an aggressive butterfly on your nature walk.

If I'd been Jesus, I would have asked the disciples to explain their criteria for greatness. But Jesus didn't waste time with that. Instead the reading goes on, "Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.' He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'"

Remember that famous line from the Wizard of Oz where Dorothy wakes up after the house crashes down and says, "Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore." That's exactly what Jesus is saying in the gospel: "You're not in Kansas anymore! The old rules about status and honor and greatness that matter in your culture don't matter in the kingdom of God."

Look at the example Jesus gave: Jesus is the Almighty God, the Alpha and the Omega in the flesh. And he gave all that up to be born into an average family in a ho-hum little town. He gave all that up to become a carpenter. He gave all that up to spend his time working with fishermen, and eating and drinking with sinners, and healing the sick and disabled. He gave all that up to suffer an unimaginably painful and humiliating death to save us from our sins and restore us to God. He went from the glory of heaven to the agony of the cross to show us how much God loves us. If you really want to be the greatest, Jesus says, then follow his example and learn that greatness isn't about you. It's about God working through you.

Read through the Bible from beginning to end and look very carefully at who God used to do His work. God didn't choose the strongest, the most powerful, the bravest, the smartest people to change the world. In fact, almost everyone God chose to use for His work would have been voted "Least Likely to Succeed." So how did they end up being heroes of the faith? They let God use them for His good works. So what would happen if you and I did the same thing?

Jesus calls us to be his disciples, His true followers. He calls us to set aside our own desires for the sake of others. He calls us to seek **the greatness of humble generosity**, to "rank first" among our families, friends and communities by taking on the spirit and role of being their servant. **"If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be last of all and the servant of all."** The jealousy and selfish ambition that attacks the just man in the Book of Wisdom in our first reading, and that James berates in the second reading are the sad marks of people who have rejected God and His Son. The sign of the Christian is seen in his or her setting another's needs over his or her wants.

The goal of our lives is union with God. The strength to achieve this union comes from following the example that the Lord set for. He made Himself weak so we could be strong. We pray today for this strength, the strength to reach out to others in charity, the strength to find the true greatness of being God's instrument in the world.