Dear Friends,

True Greatness

If you were to plan out the ideal future for yourself, what would it look like? Imagine if you were not constrained by budget or resources. Imagine if you could pick to do anything you wanted, to go anywhere you wanted, and enjoy any activity that you wanted. Imagine the greatest experience you could possibly have. What would that be? Most people would immediately think about indulging in the greatest pleasures imaginable. A life of the most luxurious accommodations, the best food, the most beautiful scenery and the most relaxing and enjoyable time possible. But would that truly be the “ideal future for yourself?” Will that bring you to greatness?

The Gospel of today offers a very different scenario. Greatness, in Jesus’ view, is found in our willingness to accept, welcome and serve those who are considered unacceptable by reason of class, color, religion, wealth, or culture. We must welcome people the way a child welcomes them before he is taught discrimination. If we are to be truly great, we must be ready to accept four challenges: (1) to put ourselves last, (2) to be the servant of all, (3) to receive the most insignificant human beings with love, and (4) to expect nothing in return. May the Holy Spirit help us to become truly great through humble, selfless service. St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa) puts it like this: “Be the living expression of God’s kindness through humble service; kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile and kindness in your warm greeting.”

Jesus is really challenging his followers to reconsider the cultural “wisdom” of first century Palestine! This was an “honor and shame” society, and “humility” was not the “in” word! But this is what Jesus urges the apostles to embrace: a willingness to serve others, rather than to compete for more “honor.” A “servant” is one who obeys and humbly accepts a servant relationship with all humankind. This is what real and true Discipleship is all about. To “obey” means to “listen” (from Latin obedient), to be open to anything that God might ask you to do to build up the Body of Christ. It means submitting and consecrating your will to Jesus Christ. To be “humble” means to live with a spirit of deference, putting your gifts and talents at the disposal of others, rather than vying for privileges and recognition. So, when Jesus chose to identify Himself with a young child as an example of what He meant by “servant,” it was a radical break with cultural expectations. Children had no legal status, no honor, and no rights whatsoever.

The jealousy and selfish ambition that attacks the just man in the Book of Wisdom in our first reading this Sunday, and that James berates in the second reading are the sad marks of the identification of the godless, 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. We are all called to do this, continually. Every day, every moment of the day you and I are called to consider others over ourselves. The needs of the children, the sick, the poor and the elderly call us away from ourselves and call us to become like Jesus. Every day we must resist the temptation to selfishness, the temptation to put ourselves before others. Reflect, today, upon a life of true greatness. Reflect, especially, upon how you can live such a life. How can you more completely serve others? How can you make their holiness your primary goal? How can you help others grow in their love of God? humble yourself and turn your eyes from yourself to others. Doing so will make an eternal difference for others and also for yourself.

Be blessed,
Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.

September 19, 2021

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FIRST READING
Let us condemn him to a shameful death; for according to his own words, God will take care of him. (Wis 2:20)

PSALM
The Lord upholds my life. (Ps 54)

SECOND READING
And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace. (Jas 3:18)

GOSPEL
“The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death the Son of Man will rise.” (Mk 9:31)


GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

There is something about being first. Whether it be first in line, first to be picked for the team, or the first one to finish their work, great satisfaction is achieved. Our egos love being first. It somehow sets us apart from everyone else, gives us a sense of pride and positions us to feel better than others. When we are first, we can glory in our efforts, skills, and achievements. Isn’t that what really matters? After all, we are taught from a very young age to be proficient, stay on top, be the best at what we do, and win the praise and esteem of others. This is the stuff that makes us successful and provides us with a comfortable, satisfying life.

Jesus wants none of it. All of the details we anguish over mean little to the kingdom of God. You want to be first? Then, be a servant and welcome a child. All of this is the opposite of our often vehement pursuits. If we are serious about following Jesus and living the Gospel, then we must put the needs of others before our own. If we continue to listen only to the noise of the world, we are going to continue to believe the illusions we inherit. Those illusions come in many forms, but all have things in common: me before you, being on top and not the bottom, us versus them, personal security over universal harmony and peace. When are we going to learn that always striving to be the best and first is an empty pursuit in our struggle for happiness? While satisfying our ego with this momentary boost of esteem may feel good for a moment, is it what we really desire?

If we can break from the world’s noise and create a space of sacred silence in our lives, we can begin to listen and see that we are being called in another direction. What we really desire is not the bolstering of our egos but the innocence we lost somewhere along the way. When we can be playful, joyful, and even somewhat carefree, life is good. We want our relationships to work, a place to call home, and to live peaceful lives with our sisters and brothers. Only a servant can do this. The servant’s prayer seeks to detach from self-concern in order to be used by God. Rather than worrying about being first and coming out on top, we can be inspired, guided, empowered, and led to do good works. Stop worrying about being first and put greater energy into feeling joy.
The first reading, Wisdom. 2:12, 17-20

The Book of Wisdom was written about fifty years before the coming of Christ. Its author, whose name is not known to us, was probably a member of the Jewish community at Alexandria, in Egypt. He wrote in Greek, in a style patterned on that of Hebrew verse. At times he speaks in the person of Solomon, placing his teachings on the lips of the wise king of Hebrew tradition in order to emphasize their value. His profound knowledge of the earlier Old Testament writings is reflected in almost every line of the book, and marks him, like Ben Sira, as an outstanding representative of religious devotion and learning among the sages of postexilic Judaism.

The primary purpose of the author was the edification of his co-religionists in a time when they had experienced suffering and oppression, in part at least at the hands of apostate fellow Jews. To convey his message he made use of the most popular religious themes of his time, namely the splendor and worth of divine wisdom.

Today’s passage is a messianic prophecy of Jesus’ fate at the hands of Jesus’ own people, presenting Jesus as a “Suffering servant.” Referring to a righteous sufferer, the passage points to Jesus’ crucifixion and tells us how the world often ill-treats those who strive to live justly and do God’s will.

Bible scholars consider this as a reference to a conflict that was developing among the Jews living in Alexandria. The conflict was between those who were trying to keep their Faith pure, and those who were adopting pagan Greek customs. The current lure of the secular world over the spiritual influence of God’s word is a similar situation that especially the parents of young adults must be aware of.

The second reading - James: 3:16 – 4:3

At one time or another all of us have faced challenging situations that have been confusing and discouraging. And in those circumstances we’ve often wished that we could find a friend who understood what was really going on and who could give us some practical advice to follow. Such a friend would be a source of wisdom that would bring us great joy.

In many ways, this is how it was for the early Christians who first received the New Testament epistle of James. They faced challenging circumstances that had left many of them confused and discouraged. And James wrote to give them wisdom. He wrote to remind them of God’s good purposes for their circumstances. He let them know that God offered reliable guidance that they should follow. And he assured them that if they would embrace the wisdom of God, they would experience great joy. James is emphatic about the contrast between spiritual wisdom and earthly wisdom. The apostle states that conflicts and disputes come from our inordinate desires, worldly cravings and selfish ambition. It is precisely this kind of conflict that appears in the Gospel when the apostles argue about who will be highest in the Kingdom of God. James contrasts this kind of jealousy and selfishness with the wisdom from above that produces a harvest of righteousness.

GOSPEL INSIGHTS

The context: Jesus was returning to Capernaum after journeying incognito through the Northern Province of Galilee, avoiding crowds and teaching the apostles. Mark presents Jesus as giving three predictions about His coming suffering and death in chapters, 8, 9 and 10. The response by Jesus’ disciples is a disappointment, because they were dreaming of a political messiah who would usher in an earthly kingdom. In chapter 8, Peter rebukes Jesus for speaking so. In chapter 9, (the first part of today’s text), an argument arises among the disciples as to who among them is the greatest. In the third passage (chapter 10), James and John foolishly ask Jesus to give them seats on his right and left, when Jesus comes to power. “The grumbling of the other ten disciples at the request of James and John surely implies that they have shared the same hopes of authority and privilege as have the sons of Zebedee.”

The paradox of the first becoming the last:

Here, Jesus stands conventional wisdom on its head: the truly great person is a diakonos — a deacon — a servant — a person who spends his/her day taking care of other people! What does it mean when Jesus states that those who want to be the first must be the last? Probably, Jesus is speaking of His own life and death in this spirit of His being a servant and considered the last, the loser. Jesus wants the apostles to substitute their ambition to rule thus becoming the first, with the ambition to serve, thus becoming the last. We are all supposed to be serving, whatever our position or role in the society or family or in the Church may be, because true greatness lies in being like Jesus, the servant or slave of all.

By introducing the example of a child, Jesus also shows us that, when serving others, we must be careful to serve the least important. This means that the Christian must show hospitality to those who have no social status: the outcast, the sinner, the sick and the feeble. In other words, the Christian must serve all of God’s children, regardless of whether they are friends or foes.
As a Christian, though, I find myself asking where Jesus aligns with ideas of leadership. He set a firm foundation on how to lead others through love, grace, and toward a better version of themselves. He did this in five ways.

1. He saw potential instead of perfection. Every single one of Jesus' disciples were works in progress. He called simple laborers, corrupt tax collectors, tag-alongs, politicians, and even a thief. It would make sense that the Savior of the world would select perfect men to be the future leaders of his church. Yet, instead of looking at the outside, he looked at their hearts. He developed their potential. He didn't seek perfection, he sought potential.

2. He forgave even before he was forsaken. Judas eventually gave Jesus up for 30 pieces of silver. Jesus knew this would happen, yet in Matthew 26 and John 13 he still washed the feet of Judas and fed him at the last supper. Jesus still cared for Judas despite his evil intentions. He cared for the hearts of every person he served, including Judas.

3. Jesus asked questions. Often Jesus was challenged by the religious leaders of his time. At other times his followers questioned him as they sought the truth of God. However, Jesus often responded by asking questions. He was teaching both his disciples and the Jewish leaders to seek answers and problem-solve on their own. When he did respond directly, he often used stories that required reflection. Jesus asked more questions than he answered.

4. He served others rather than expecting to be served. Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). In John 13 Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. This task, although seemingly simple, was culturally unheard of in his time. Leaders did not wash the feet of those they led. This task was servant work; it was dirty, it was lowly, it definitely wasn't something that was expected of a leader. He showed his followers that the true mission of a leader is to serve others.

5. Jesus led with grace and accountability. In many of his interactions, Jesus commanded people to go and sin no more. However, he often met them with unexpected grace first. In John 7 we read of a woman that had sinned and, by law, should have been put to death. His response was that all people sin, and that only the innocent can condemn. He led with grace and forgiveness and changed this woman's life, then he sent her out to sin no more. He led with grace but sent out with accountability.

My natural tendency is to always meet others with the expectation of following rules. I often struggle to extend grace when mistakes are made. We can always lead others to be better, but we must remember people make mistakes and deserve grace.

Leadership is challenging. It isn't always easy to make decisions and lead someone else to the best version of themselves. Jesus set an example of what it means to truly care for others, to lead them to a better tomorrow, and to encourage growth.

We can be encouraged that Christ will not only shape our hearts and minds as individuals, but he will also guide our hearts and minds as leaders.

Sean Lord is a pastor, husband, and father. He enjoys writing about leadership, theology, and ministry.

In what areas of life do I need to improve my ‘servant leadership’?
2. Do people in general perceive me as an authoritarian or servant leader?
3. Describe one person who impressed you personally as a servant leader. How would you imitate him/her?