

When I was serving in Massachusetts, I went to an event at their Cathedral called the Ministry Network Showcase, a series of presentations on ministries happening all over our diocese. Driving into Boston is a questionable idea at best, but that day, getting in was especially terrible. Two different backups on 128, trouble parking, then navigating around two different construction zones on foot. I missed the Bishop's welcome, the whole first presentation, and worst of all, breakfast.

As you might imagine, I was in quite a state. The second presenter began by asking us, "What is the most valuable thing we can offer the world?" His first slide clearly emphasized the word, "Community," and I thought, "Come on, any group of people can offer that." But he did ask, in a way that indicated he wanted us to shout out an answer, so I said, "Jesus!" A bit louder than I intended, and from my colleagues' reactions, clearly not the answer many expected. But the presenter didn't seem to mind, and other people chimed in: "Love." "Worship." "Music." "Service." And, of course, "Community." All of those are great things.

He went on to give such a compelling presentation on intentional Christian communities that the diocese had started, programs that provide affordable housing and service opportunities, that I didn't just forget all about the difficulty of getting there, I got so excited I sought him out during the first break to talk about ways of putting his ideas into practice that might work for a smaller parish. And while I've never wanted to be in the real estate business, he did say that one model is where an elder who needs care wills their house to the church, and the church finds young adults who move in and provide care for the elder while paying below-market rent. Everybody wins. Including Jesus.

If that sounds like something you'd like to explore, talk to me.

But Jesus probably didn't feel like he was winning at the start of today's Gospel. He had been on a difficult, frustrating trip with his disciples. "Prior to our text, Jesus had just come down from the mountain [of the Transfiguration] with Peter, James, and John... . What awaited him when he descended was a large crowd where some disciples were arguing with some Scribes over the disciples' failed attempt to help a boy tormented with a demon. Jesus went on to complete the exorcism successfully, but at this point, many people have attacked him, frustrated him, or let him down. It must have felt like an 0-3 start to his season. So Jesus was probably in quite a state when he noticed the disciples were having a conversation they didn't want him to hear.

Community isn't always everything it's cracked up to be.

But Jesus does not do what we expect, does not do what he has every right to do, what we might well do in his place. He does not lash out at them. You can almost hear him sigh. It seems like he took a moment to collect himself and decide to give them what they need, not a rebuke, but wisdom, a glimpse of the heart of God. He somehow borrowed a small child before sitting down to teach them. And just like my experience in Boston, how could anyone hold on to petty disputes or workaday aggravation after watching Jesus take a child in his arms and say, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

We need to unpack that because that would have meant something very different to them. In those days, children weren't valued the way they are now. Children received the least honor and regard in the families Jesus knew because they couldn't do much to help their families. Children were, at best, risky investments; they were precious not

innately, but because they would someday be able to help the family through labor and/or marriage, and would take care of their parents in their old age. That is, of course, provided the children survived childhood; without vaccines, mortality was high. Children truly were the least and the last in that society. They ranked below slaves, who could do useful things right now. So welcoming a child, that is, showing a child the hospitality that would be accorded to an honored adult guest, would have been humiliating to do and ridiculous to consider. If Jesus had given this teaching under other circumstances, the disciples might have laughed out loud.

Instead, perhaps *because* of the difficult context, which made it clear Jesus was serious, the disciples listen. And that unforgettable image helped them understand that God's ways are profoundly different from the ways of the world. The last truly are first with God, for they know only too well what is true for all of us: that all they have comes from God. The last among us are spared the delusions of self-sufficiency. They know that everything is a gift, and anything can fail or go away at any moment — anything but God. And the last know that God is incredibly, profoundly generous. As we are God's children, God lavishes us with generosity that God knows we could never repay. All we can do is respond.

Something I just learned about the text we just heard from Mark is that the original Greek which is translated, "they had argued with one another who was the greatest," could also be translated, "they had discussed what 'greatness' is." The word that describes the tenor of the conversation is ambiguous, and crucially, the words that describe what they were saying "are just a pronoun and an adjective. It could be [who greatest, that is,] 'Who [is the] greatest' or ... [what greatness, that is,] 'What [is] greatness.' " And I agree with the scholar Mark Davis, who pointed this out in the first place, that it makes sense that the disciples would be pondering the nature of greatness at this point in the story.

Last week at bible study, someone asked a simple but insightful question that I'd never given much thought to. If the disciples keep misunderstanding Jesus and coming up short, why do they keep following him? Many others had fallen away at this point in the story, so it's more than Jesus's charisma keeping them there. There were other savvy leaders and wise teachers they could have followed. And I have to think it was more than friendship, as we have seen instances like Peter's conflict with Jesus where their friendship was seriously strained. I think, contrary to the most common perception, that the disciples are beginning to catch on. I think they recognized that despite all the challenges of their mission and their friendship with Jesus, that he was authentically, powerfully, and uniquely holy, and that God was doing a new thing in and through him. And they didn't want to be anywhere else.

So it makes sense that they would be newly open to reconsider what "greatness" really is. They already accepted that true greatness did *not* lie in wealth or power over others; if they wanted those things, they wouldn't have followed Jesus in the first place. They had to reconcile the exorcism they had just seen, an act of undeniable spiritual power, with Jesus's teaching that he must be killed and rise again, which in this second instance adds the humiliation of being betrayed. On the one hand, the Son of Man was supposed to be in charge, not get handed over like chattel, but on the other, if Jesus could overcome supernatural evil on his own initiative, how could it even matter if he were betrayed into human hands? It might have been dawning on them just how much

greater Jesus was than they had seen or considered.

“What is the most valuable thing we can offer the world?” Like the disciples, we may not always see or consider the fullness of the greatness of Jesus, but our church is constantly sharing the love of Jesus with the world, in thousands of parish, diocesan, and churchwide ministries. Prisoners visited. Drug addicts, finding respect and hope. Immigrants taken in and given a chance at life in America. Children of immigrants learning English. Children of incarcerated people playing at summer camp. Stereotypes dispelled through encounter and art. Proclamation of Gospel justice to the powerful, on behalf of the powerless. The lonely become family. In so many ways, the hungry fed, the thirsty given water. All in our name and in the name of Jesus Christ, who came preaching good news to “the least of these,” in word as well as in deed. All of this ministry happens because Christians choose to respond to God’s generosity with our own.

I had to go to an event to be reminded of what less fortunate people know intimately: that God is shockingly generous, for God’s greatness is based on love. When Christians focus on living according to the wisdom, grace, and love of Jesus, we too can show the world the radical generosity of God.

*<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/09/edgy-conversations-of-vulnerable-christ.html>