

Children Are the Greatest • Luke 9:36-50

Although I have never bought a first-class plane ticket I have flown first-class a number of times. It is very nice. With it comes early boarding, wide seats, a first-class bathroom, flight attendants who hang up your jacket for you and special meals served on white tablecloths with cloth napkins and real silverware. But flying first-class is more than the additional space and other perks. There is a certain sense of privilege and even superiority. As all the coach people walk past you to their seats you know they are wishing they were flying first-class.

But the opposite feeling comes when you have to sit in the back of the plane. One time I flew outbound in first-class with an upgrade certificate but I couldn't get a first-class seat coming back. The first-class cabin was already booked full. I had an upgrade certificate that was ready to expire but I couldn't use it. As I walked past those first-class seats I thought to myself, "I belong up here. I used to sit right there in 3C. They all act like they are so much better." Then I went to the back of the plane where the seats are three across on both sides, leg room is minimal, the overhead racks are full, you have to either wear your jacket for the whole flight or roll it up into a ball and jam it in between overhead suitcases, there is a line at the bathroom and the meal is served in Saran Wrap and eaten with plastic utensils. It could be easy to get into an argument about who sits where and about who should be first-class and who should not.

That was what happened with Jesus' followers in the story in Luke 9:46-50:

An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is

least among you all—he is the greatest."

"Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he was not one of us."

"Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."

Greatness was on their minds. They got into an argument trying to establish which disciple was the greatest of them all. We don't know exactly why this debate began but some would guess that it is tied to an earlier story in this same chapter when Jesus took three out of his twelve disciples with him up the Mount of Transfiguration. There, Peter, James and John saw a heavenly sight of Jesus, Moses and Elijah in brilliant celestial splendor. When they came down from this astonishing mountaintop experience they must have bubbled over with enthusiasm.

Perhaps one of them said, "You should have been there!" Those who weren't there wished they could have been there but they weren't invited. Those left behind felt neglected, unappreciated, left out and unimportant. And those three prob-

ably felt special, honored, elevated and very important. There was a class system in the small circle of Jesus' followers—first-class and coach, up the mountain and down,

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great and not so great.

It's a debate we all share. Position is important. What's the difference between driving a Mercedes, Lexus, Hyundai or Honda? All are foreign-made cars. All transport from point A to point B. All have heat in the winter and air-conditioning in the summer. They all have safety equipment. But to us, each tends to say something about who is the greatest and who is not.

What is the difference in a company between the titles of president, vice-president, executive vice-president, senior vice-president, assistant

vice-president and retired vice-president? To many the difference is huge. These titles not only determine a person's salary, office, parking place and expense account but also prestige both inside the company and out. It says something about who is the greatest and who is not.

Or what is the difference in a graduating class between the valedictorian, the salutatorian, members of the honor society and the rest of the graduating class? What is the difference between a varsity letter, a junior varsity letter and an academic letter? They are all ways in which we determine who is great and who is not.

Why do people pay large amounts of money for courtside seats at the Target Center or for box seats at the Metro-dome? Is it really to see the game better? The truth is, if you want to see the game better, stay home and watch it on television! Or is there some status to where we sit?

This argument enters almost every area of life. Churches have bishops, deacons, pastors, district superintendents, elders and all kinds of other titles. Armies classify privates, corporals, sergeants, lieutenants, majors, colonels and general officers. Faculties have tenured, tenured track, non-tenured and adjunct faculty members. There are full professors, associate professors and instructors. From street gangs to the United States Senate we are constantly positioning in the proverbial pecking order to decide who is great and who is not so great.

Jesus not only heard what they were saying but he read their thoughts. In Luke 9:47 we are told: "*Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him.*"

What a statement! Jesus knows our thoughts! That both scares me and satisfies me. It scares me to realize that there is no place for me to hide from Jesus Christ. He can read my mind and examine my soul and know the real me on the inside. No matter how much I posture and pretend to those who only know me from the outside, Jesus knows me from the inside. He knows my heart. But it also satisfies me to know that Jesus knows my motives. When I say and do stupid things that are misunderstood, Jesus knows I meant well. When I try to do good and it turns

out bad, Jesus knows where I was coming from.

Having read his followers' thoughts, Jesus "*took a little child and had him stand beside him.*" There is something cultural here that we might miss. In ancient societies the place of honor was always on the right side of the king or emperor. That was the place where everyone wanted to stand or sit. That was the place of high recognition and honor. It was the position of acknowledgment and importance.

Maybe it's not so different today. When Jesse Ventura was Governor of Minnesota he attended the National Governors' Conference in Washington D.C. During that conference there was a White House dance at which he observed that there was always a large space surrounding President and Mrs. Clinton when they danced. Everyone stepped back and kept a distance from them. The Venturas decided to take that space and danced right up next to the Clintons. The Governor observed that this might be his only chance so he decided to take it. Location matters.

Jesus responded to the "Greatness Debate" between his followers by filling the place of greatest greatness with a child. Why a child? Because children are different from adults! A child usually isn't concerned about greatness, about pecking order, about how much money people have, about jobs or beauty or power or position. This child probably focused fully on Jesus and didn't care about the "Greatness Debate" that was going on around him.

I wonder if Jesus' followers were offended. Did they resent the child? Did they think Jesus was inappropriate? It could be interpreted as an insult to give such great honor to a child who hadn't done anything to deserve it and couldn't appreciate the honor that was given.

Jesus added a verbal explanation to his visual object lesson. He was working toward the Jesus principle that "*he who is least among you all—he is the greatest.*" He led up to the principle with an explanation that "*whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*" Jesus was claiming the humblest place for himself. He was identifying with the child.

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The broader principle here is that Jesus identifies with those who are less important and unimportant. He has an “upside-down” approach. Jesus is not impressed with title, position, fame, fortune or all of the things that so often tend to impress us.

As a seminary student I worked on staff at a church in Colorado. Each Sunday I taught the lesson in two Children’s Church programs. The first was for 2-3 year olds; the second was for 4-5 year olds. I tried to teach them what I had studied in theology classes the previous week. Whether it was the doctrine of salvation, the inspiration of Scripture or the eschatology of prophecy, I sought to find ways and words to teach the children the truth.

They didn’t care that I was a graduate student. They couldn’t understand the big words I had to memorize. I had to find words in their vocabulary range. They were wonderful young children who sat with me in a circle on the floor and listened to what I had to say.

I don’t pretend that those children grew up to remember what I taught. I’m not sure they understood what I was talking about at the time. Yet, it is one of my very best memories of those years—not the times I was privileged to preach in the “big church” or the seminary students and professors—it was the children. *“Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”*

Several years ago a man at Wooddale Church was approached to serve as an elder. I think that to be an elder is a wonderful privilege. He said “no”. He was approached a year later and refused again. When pressed to explain his refusal he explained that he was a teacher of a boys’ class and didn’t want to give that up to serve as an elder. *“Whoever welcomes this little child in my*

name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Not long ago I sat in an office with the CEO of one of the better-known large businesses in the Twin Cities. We were discussing ways in which he could use his gifts in the ministry of Wooddale Church. I asked him what he would like to do and rattled off a list of possibilities, not really intending it to be a list of suggestions but more a priming of the conversation. Among the suggestions I made were teaching adults, leading a task force, being an elder, working in the nursery, singing in the choir or serving as an usher. I was caught off guard when he said, “I would be glad to work in the nursery.” He heads up a business with thousands of employees but he would be glad

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to work in the nursery. *“Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”*

What this is all about is not children; Jesus was teaching the hierarchy of heaven. He presents here a principle so profound and shocking that we are still trying to figure it out almost 2000 years later. He is communicating that true greatness is in humility, it is in service, it is in caring about those who are not famous, not powerful, not impressive, not important. As far as Jesus is concerned, the best way to the top is to scramble for the bottom.

I watched an interview on television of Mohammed Ali during which they played clips of his early career as a prizefighter—way back to when his name was Cassias Clay. He was proud, audacious and came across as arrogant. He repeatedly said, “I am the greatest!” While he was a champion boxer he turned off a lot of people. Although he became the heavy weight champion of the world three times many didn’t think he was the greatest. But then he grew older. He could no longer fight. Parkinson’s disease and

medications impacted his body and significantly slowed his speech. He no longer claimed to be so great. And the honors came pouring in. Streets and parks were named after him; he was recognized as an “ambassador of good will” around the world. It seemed he was far greater in weakness than he ever was in strength. It is the Jesus principle: “. . . *he who is least among you all—he is the greatest.*”

When Jesus’ followers heard him they balked at this teaching. They didn’t like it. John was the one who spoke for the group, although my guess is that they were all on the defensive. Maybe John was the spokesman because he was one of the three who had gone with Jesus to the top of the mountain. Maybe he had claimed to be better than the others. Maybe he didn’t like the implications of Jesus’ teaching.

Whatever the reason, John did what most of us tend to do when we react to a principle we dislike. John cited a specific example . . . a specific person. “*Master, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.*” John wanted to make it clear that this other guy wasn’t a good guy because he didn’t belong to their little group. He was protecting his turf.

Christians and churches still do this today. It is very easy to be critical of another church in town or of the success of a congregation in a different denomination. The tendency is to say, “They’re really not Christians. At least they’re not as Christian as we are. We’re better. We’re more righteous. We’re greater.”

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Jesus was not endorsing heresy or approving something sinful. He was simply saying that those who minister in his name are not to be stopped. Bless them. Pray for them. Be great by celebrating their success.

For John it came down to a specific person to whom he compared himself. Often it’s that way for us. We compare ourselves to a brother or a sister. We compare to a competing athlete, a pro-

fessional colleague or a business associate who seems to be getting ahead of us. Honestly, the personal test of our living the Jesus principle usually comes down to our comparison to specific other individuals. The Jesus principle is lived out in real life situations: He or she who is least among you is the person who is the greatest!

When the Special Olympics were held in the Twin Cities there was a moment on the running track that grabbed the hearts of America. All the competitors had physical and/or mental disabilities. They were lined up at the starting line waiting for the gun to start the race while thousands of parents and others cheered them on. The race began, but one of the runners stumbled and fell. Realizing what had happened, the other runners stopped, went back, helped him up and then resumed the race.

How very Christian! Just like Jesus!

“Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he (or she) who is least among you all—(that person) is the greatest.”

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