

At a recent meeting of the Women's Bible Study group, the ladies were sitting having tea and talking about their children. One lady said "My son recently ran for elected office and won so now whenever he enters a room people stand up and say "Hello Senator!" Not to be outdone, a second woman pipes up and says "Well my son is a bishop and when he enters a room everyone stands and says "Hello, your Grace." There was an awkward moment of silence because, after all, that would be hard to top; until a third lady finally spoke up and said, "Well my son is one of the Chippendale Dancers and when he walks into a room everyone jumps up, screams and says "O My Lord!"

One upmanship. Holier than thou. Whittier than thou, more knowledgeable about the Bible than thou. Better car than thou. Larger house than thou. More politically correct than thou. More politically incorrect than thou.

And then Jesus walks up to us and asks us what we were talking about while we journeyed together. From today's gospel "And as the disciples walked along an argument broke out over which of them was the greatest." Today, I want you to consider who is the greatest person you have ever known. I am going to tell you about the greatest person I have ever known, but first I want to look at this gospel a bit more closely.

Things were going quite well for Jesus and his followers. They went from town to town, teaching, healing and building up quite a following. The early stages of the movement were what any of us would recognize as a success, but the success of the movement went straight to the disciples heads. Jesus did tell them that it was all leading to betrayal, death, and resurrection, but never underestimate people's ability **not** to hear what they don't want to hear, and so the disciples instead fell into an argument over which one of them was the greatest.

Jesus, the ever patient teacher, gives them a very different image of greatness: he took a child in his arms to illustrate the saying that those who want to be first must be last and the servant of all.

Lest we think that this is a simple moral talk about why we should embrace children, let me assure you that this is a much more challenging story that drives home the point that the values of this world pertaining to greatness are in direct contradiction to the teaching of Jesus on the subject, and that on some level Christians need to decide what they believe in more, the gospel of Jesus Christ or the gospel of power and materialism.

The child in the gospel lesson is not so much about children per se, but serves as an illustration for the powerless, the vulnerable, and the dependent.

Jesus is saying "When you think about greatness, don't think about prestige and power, think instead about caring for and welcoming those who are weak in the world's eyes."

This is not to say that our positions and possessions are in and of themselves bad or wrong. It is to say that they start as value neutral and are good if we use them to serve God's vulnerable people but can become a spiritual problem when we forget the truth conveyed in this gospel: That "the great" will really be judged, not by what they have accomplished or accumulated, but by how they treat the "not so great" of this world.

So now for the greatest person I have ever met. I must confess that I really wrestled with it. I too have that tug of war within me because I've met some powerful people, some sports stars, some bishops and archbishops, but as I reflected on the values expressed in this gospel, the person who came to mind was a childhood friend of mine whose name was Will but who was known to everyone as Wilbo.

Wilbo never set a record or ran for office, instead Wilbo was the most accident prone person I ever knew. Wilbo was fond of Marshall Arts, but he had to give it up because every time he worked out with his num chucks he gave himself a concussion by clocking himself in the head. Wilbo was an adopted child in a family of 24 children, 22 of which were adopted, so he was always looking for things to do that got him outside the house.

He was regularly picked on in the neighborhood, regularly lost fights to his older brothers, but I selected Wilbo as the greatest person I've every know for two reasons: In almost 20 years I never heard him say an unkind word about anyone, and because I developed the sense that God observes the rest of us through the eyes of people like Wilbo, people who are too kind for the violence of this world, people who are vulnerable to the power games that go on. Wilbo is the person in my life who most resembles, in my mind, the child in today's gospel. Meek, vulnerable, always loving and thus, the greatest. Isn't it fascinating irony that the all powerful God is most deeply concerned with the powerless, and wants us to be the same.

So my challenge to you is to take a few moments today, set aside the important people you have known, and ask yourself, in light of this gospel, who is the greatest person you have known. Then give thanks to God for their role in your life and ask yourself how you can embrace them or someone like them.