

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Sep 28th 2015

I see two powerful statements in today's reading from Luke. First, there is the argument among the disciples about who is the greatest. We can imagine that the character of this debate probably focused on the things we often think make us great: who was the "most perfect," who did "the best," who was the "most committed." This kind of thinking is familiar to us. But Jesus turns it on its head and tells us, in no uncertain terms, that a child, the least among us, is the greatest. The criteria for greatness lies in becoming more like the least. I think one way to interpret this is to hear Jesus saying that the greatest are the ones who recognize the depth of their need. Children are entirely dependent on others to live; it is obvious that they have a great need. As we grow into adulthood, however, it's easy to think that we become less dependent and have less need, and more of an ability to take care of ourselves. Jesus reminds us that this is indeed not the case, which is hard for someone like me who likes to think of myself as self-sufficient and able to take care of and deal with things on my own. The greatest among us are those who recognize their need for others, are able to allow themselves to rely on others, because it is those people who are most in tune with the nature of God and their own nature as beings dependent upon God.

This recognition leads directly to humility, I think, which is essential for considering the second important statement we get from Jesus in this reading: excluding others and having a "who's in and who's out" mentality is not the way that Jesus calls us to be. Again, we can imagine the disciples talking about this person who worked in Jesus' name, but maybe did not think or act exactly as they did. This meant he was bad, or at least not good enough to be spoken of in the same breath as them, right? Wrong. The message Jesus offers does not seem to allow for a lived Christianity based on doctrinal or political orthodoxy, or only one viewpoint or way of thinking. Accepting this and being able to live within the tension of different people, different ideas, and different ways of doing things requires one thing above all: humility. When we humbly accept our dependence on God and each other, and accept our own incompleteness, brokenness, and imperfection, we are less likely to exclude and judge others who are different than us and who don't live up to our own expectations, which we honestly often don't live up to ourselves, either. When we begin along that path, then we will have at least begun to understand what it means to be the "greatest" in the eyes of God.

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