

**Sunday, September 20, 2015**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon - "Who Is the Greatest?"**

---

One of the things I love about scripture is that we don't just get the lessons, but the narrative that leads up to it.

Rather than simply stating that humility is a virtue to strive for, Jesus artfully inquires about the earlier discussion.

By asking the disciples what they were arguing about (which he likely already knows the answer to) he creates a teaching moment that is starkly relevant to their lives.

Notice that no one answers the question.

No one volunteers that they have been debating who is the greatest among them.

They defer, perhaps knowing that Jesus knows.

Jesus launches right into his lesson, not needing to point out their petty ways.

Jesus points out that the greatest in God's kingdom are the ones who are willing to serve and to welcome the least and most vulnerable.

His embrace of a child has been sentimentalized over time depicting Jesus being surrounded by angel-like children.

In reality, Jesus' choice of a child was a demonstration of embracing the least powerful person in society.

Children had little status during Jesus' time and by using a child to demonstrate his expectation of an extravagant welcome, Jesus signaled that even the lowest had status in God's kingdom.

Jesus wanted them to see the child.

He wants us to see the child, too--and welcome the child.

Not because the child is innocent or perfect or pure or cute or curious or naturally religious.

Jesus wanted them to welcome the child because the child was at the bottom of the social heap.

In Mark's gospel children are often sick or disabled.

Children in Mark are not symbols of holiness or innocence, but more often they are the victims of poverty and disease.

Jesus brings the child from the margins into the very center.

This child is not a symbol but a person, a little person easily overlooked, often unseen and unheard.

What would the world be like if we truly cared for, really worried about, the fate of children?

What if every law that was passed, every policy implemented had to meet a standard of helping, or at least not hurting, children.

Today we are faced with tough challenges of acceptance in our own world – who do we let in to our country?; where do we build fences to keep people out?; whom do we welcome?

Our political candidates often seem to be running a race of who can be least welcoming and most judgmental.

Our call, however, as Christians is to discern how we can be most loving, most like Jesus.

Our goal in life is not to be the greatest in power – but in discipleship.

Jesus invites us to be servants in his Father's kingdom.

That kingdom is not just someplace that you go when you die.

The kingdom of God is here.

It is now, in our lives.

We have the opportunity to make choices that will build the kingdom Jesus envisioned – the one where children are seen and loved; the one where greatness is not a matter of power, but of compassion.

In Jesus' kingdom, the contest is to be first among servants – who can best serve God?

How often do you compare yourself to others?

This is such a common human practice.

It is the reason why we love rankings.

We love to look up our college, or the town we live in, or our favorite sports team and see where they rank compared to others.

In a more subtle way, we do it with other people all the time.

We walk into a room and instantly assess how other people are dressed; how fat or thin they are; how successful they appear.

For some reason, humans love to do this – to compare.

We seem more naturally inclined to comparison rather than compassion.

We line our own misfortunes up against other people's to soothe ourselves.

How often have you heard someone characterize their own misfortune by saying, "I know there are people worse off than me."

In God's kingdom there is no need to compare oneself to others – no need to discuss who is the greatest because each and every person – regardless of age, gender, or status knows that they are a beloved child of God.

Earlier this week I heard a radio interview with Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, founder of the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, Colorado.

She is known in religious circles for the extravagant welcome she offers to the marginalized members of Denver's community.

Recovering addicts, transgendered youth, tattooed 20-somethings, have found spiritual home at her church.

When questioned about what she wanted people to believe who came to her church she responded that she didn't presume to tell people that they had to believe the same things she believed to be welcomed in their community;

the interviewer followed up with the question, "Are you more concerned about people's actions than their beliefs?"

Bolz-Weber replied, "I'm not even really concerned about their actions, no.

What are you concerned about?" asked the interviewer and the reply was:

"My job is to preach the Gospel; to point to Christ and to remind people that they're absolutely loved and that their identity is based in something other than the categories of late-stage capitalism; that they are named and claimed by God and that this is an identity that is more foundational than any of the others. And that they're completely forgiven – all their mess ups are not more powerful than God's mercy and God's ability to redeem us."

I heard the interview and couldn't help but wonder why someone who was so clearly articulating Jesus' words was considered a radical theologian.

Isn't this what we strive for?

This is certainly what I believe.

When we extend a welcome to people in this church my hope is that we are doing so with open hearts and open minds.

In *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis wrote:

"True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."

This is my prayer for us.

That we will build God's kingdom, right here, right now, by our own acts of compassion and trust.

We will create a place where every person can feel God's welcome – where the least can be brought to the center and celebrated.

Who is the greatest among you?

Look around and compare yourself to Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, we commit ourselves to you.

Body and soul – we are your servants.

Help us to discern our role in building your kingdom on earth.

Help us to welcome the least among us to a place of privilege in our community.

Grant us the grace to see the opportunities to serve that you place before us.

Grant us the humility to set our own needs aside as we tend to our neighbors.

For those who are sick, we pray for healing.

For those who grieve we pray for comfort.

For those who live without community, without food, shelter, safety and compassion, we pray that your holy spirit will find its way to their hearts.

Hear us, O God, this day as we turn to you in the sacred silence of this meetinghouse with the prayers of our hearts....

Amen.