

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Mankind seems to be born with an innate desire to be the best at what we do. If it's a result of the fall into sin or a part of God's good creation, I don't know, but it's there.

As I was getting to know the 8th graders at the beginning of school this year, I asked the students to tell me their name and something about themselves. One student — he'll remain nameless — told me and the class that he was the best at everything (meaning, I think, in athletic competition). It's why we compete: to demonstrate who's the best. We want to be the best. Consolation prizes provide little consolation. Participation trophies are ok for little ones; but when you get older who wants them? After all, if everyone wins, the prize is meaningless. Well, that's my attitude, anyway.

And so athletes train — many of our Olympians train their whole lives so that they can compete, so that they might win the gold and show themselves to be the fastest or the strongest, the one who can jump the highest or throw the farthest, the best individual tennis player or golfer, the best team in gymnastics, or basketball, or volleyball. We Americans love our sports. We may not have liked the debauchery of the Paris Olympics Opening Ceremony, but most of us were still rooting for our athletes to win gold, to be number 1, and to hear our national anthem played.

Even St. Paul uses athletic examples. He teaches us, saying, *“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it”* (1 Cor. 9:24).

Of course, ultimately, in the race that we Christians are running, the prize is not a mere gold, silver, or bronze medal, or some other perishable trophy. We are running to receive *“an imperishable”* prize of everlasting life (1 Cor. 9:25). And so, we run our race with endurance, *“looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”* (Heb. 12:2). We don't merely start the race; there is no prize for starting the race. We run to the finish line; we finish the race (2 Tim. 4:7) to win the prize: *“the crown of righteousness”* (2 Tim. 4:8). *“[T]he one who endures to the end will be saved”* (Mark 13:13).

The disciples in our Gospel, however, on their way to Capernaum, were not seeking this imperishable prize, but a perishable one. They were discussing among themselves who was the greatest, which does seem a bit odd. Jesus had been teaching them what it means to be great in the kingdom of heaven, and He would demonstrate it by His own example.

Real greatness in the kingdom, Jesus taught, is found in humble service, being “*last of all and servant of all.*” And Jesus came down from His Father’s side for just this purpose: “*not to be served but to serve*” (Mark 10:45) the whole world, giving His own life unto death as an atoning sacrifice for the world. This is what Jesus was teaching them: “*The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they [are going to] kill him. [But even though] he is killed, after three days he will rise [again].*”

This is the race the Son of Man was running. It was an obstacle course filled with betrayal, and suffering, and death. But besting all of these obstacles and crossing the finish line, He would mount the podium in resurrection victory, not to be given a medal but crowned with glory and honor. And this was His service to us. He endured the cross, despising its shame, as the ransom price for the sins of the world—that we by faith might be forgiven of our sins. And He rose triumphant from death and ascended back to the Father’s side, that we might ourselves be awarded the imperishable prize of resurrection and life ... “[*our*] perishable bod[ies putting] on the imperishable; [*our*] mortal bod[ies putting] on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:53).

But the disciples, more interested in the perishable prize than the imperishable, didn’t ask Jesus what any of this meant. Delivered over? What does this mean? They didn’t ask that. Some people are going to kill you? They were afraid to ask. And what is this rising again from the dead? Not even talk of a miraculous resurrection could move them to ask. Instead, they argued about “Who is the greatest?”

They should have known better, and their silence at Jesus’ simple but penetrating question revealed their guilt. They were selfishly focusing on self-exaltation.

That’s not the way of the kingdom for us, either. “*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.*” Greatness in the kingdom of heaven consists of humbling oneself, and being the servant of all in the model of Jesus. “*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus*” (Phil. 2:5-8), not that Jesus came primarily to be our model for living. No, the author of our salvation ran His race of shame and cross for the redemption of sinful mankind, to pay the price for our sinfulness, to nail our sins to the tree of the cross, including our guilty silence. Greatness in the kingdom of heaven means believing this with our whole heart, trusting in Jesus wholly, as a little child does.

Oh what a paradox is the kingdom of heaven! To be first, you must be last. To be great, you must be least. Though we have been set free, yet we are duty-bound to serve. Though we have been made lords in Christ Jesus, yet we are subject to all.

It's who we are ... royal priesthood: Christian lords and Christian servants. "*If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.*" And this is our faith in action; it's how we love ... in works of free service, cheerfully and lovingly done, without expectation of reward, remembering at all times that it is not our service that saves, but the service of Him who is the greatest servant of all; His life, His death is the greatest service to mankind, for which we give thanks.

And so we do again today as we come again to the holy altar to partake of Christ's body and His blood. Here we receive the fruit of His service to us in the forgiveness of our sins, as He reckons us great in the kingdom of heaven. Here He strengthens us in our faith and our faithful service to others. Here we give thanks for His great goodness. The Lord preserve us in this child-like faith.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.