

PROPER 24, PENTECOST 22, YEAR B, OCTOBER 20, 2024

Whether we like to admit it or not the desire for status and power is one of the greatest obsessions for humankind. We love titles because they often bring with them a certain kind of status. There are court titles like King, Emperor, Czar, Sultan, Duke, Earl, and Count. There are religious titles Pope, Bishop, Vicar, Reverend, Monsignor, Archdeacon, Dean, Rabbi, Pastor. There are academic and medical titles and letters that people put after their names, BA, MA, LPN, RN, MD, DD, PHD etc. There are business titles like Chairman of the board, CEO and CFO. In government we have President, Senator, Congressperson, Governor, Mayor, Council person etc. We could go on and on with all the titles there are, and how people desire them, and how many people get upset if they do not get the title that they want, or if their titles are overlooked, or if they are not recognized in some way.

Even if it isn't a title we can get hung up on ranks. What was your rank in the service? What was your rank in school? We even have ranks in our families. Are you the first born, or the baby, or the middle child? There is within all of us a great desire to be number one in whatever field we are in, and not only to be number one, but more importantly, to be seen and recognized as number one.

Jesus faced a request in today's Gospel where James and John wanted to have the best seats in the Kingdom of God. Their ambition is on display in this exchange as they seek some kind of payout for their loyalty and service. They want to be in the number 1 and 2 positions in the Kingdom of God. James and John saw God's kingdom no different than how secular civilizations work so that is why they were seeking titles and power.

However, Jesus tells them you just don't get it. He tells them my ministry is not the same old same old roman like power – I'm about servanthood. Jesus answers that what is really important is how well you serve God and the needs of humanity, even though it might be costly. It is not status, titles and power that count but it is service that counts."

Sometimes we think that the really important people are those who rise to the ranks of President or CEOs with authority and power to lord it over others and get the others to do the work, while they take the glory. In the kingdom of God it is actually the opposite. The servants, the ones willing to take the number two positions and get the work done, to love and to care for others - they are the greatest in the kingdom of God.

Jesus recognized the dangers in the overwhelming desire for recognition and fame. Underlying much of the drive for status is really a desire for power at the expense of others. Jesus also knew that the only way that his work could be done in the world was by a loving, serving and caring community, in which no one was top dog, but everyone had gifts of ministry to be exercised with reciprocity. Jesus called his disciples together and said, Don't be like those who want to have power over you. Instead whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. We all, both clergy and lay people, need to recognize the importance of our servanthood and that in the work of Christ, the greatest need we have and the greatest strength we have is the care and love of one another.

The greatest testimony that we can have is that we through the Grace of God have served humanity like Christ, have given our lives like Christ, and have loved as

Christ. Do we live for that testimony or do we live for status, and titles, and the exercise of power to have control over others?

There is a quotation from Mother Teresa that bears repeating here. She said: "At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done.

We will be judged by "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless and you took me in." Hungry not only for bread-- but hungry for love. Naked not only for clothing-- but naked for human respect and dignity. Homeless not only for want of a room of bricks-- but homeless because of rejection. This is being Christ to everyone.

Perhaps another way of putting this is by telling the following story.

There once was a great chief who was very proud. One day he was walking through his village boasting, "I am truly great. There is no one greater than me!" A wise old woman came up to the chief and said, "I know one who is truly great." The great chief was surprised and then very angry. "What? Who is this great one? There is no one greater than me!"

The wise old woman said, "Come to my house tomorrow when the sun is at the highest point in the sky and I will introduce you to this great one." The great chief said, "Very well. I will be there and we shall see who is the greatest."

The chief went home and slept very soundly to gain strength. In the morning he prepared himself carefully and put on his finest clothing. As he did this he reminded himself of all the great things he could do. "There is no one greater than me!" he repeated to himself as he walked over to the old woman's house.

When he reached the house he called out, "Old woman, I am here. It is time. Where is this other chief?" "Come in, come in." the old woman called. When the chief entered the old woman's house he saw the old woman sitting against the wall with a baby crawling on the floor beside her. The chief looked around. There was no one else there.

"Where is the great chieftain you told me about yesterday?" he asked. The old woman motioned towards the baby and said, "This is the great one I told you about." The great chief was not amused. He yelled angrily at the old woman and shook his finger at her. "What do you mean? Don't try to trick me. This is just a baby!"

The baby frightened by the sudden loud, angry voice began to cry. The chief became flustered. He didn't mean to make the baby cry. As the baby continued to howl he forgot about his anger and got down on his hands and knees. He pulled his eagle and hawk feathers from his hair and brushed the baby's cheeks with them. He pulled off his medicine bags and held them under the baby's nose. He pulled off his necklaces and jingled them in the baby's ears. Gradually the baby stopped crying and began to listen and watch.... The old woman smiled and said,

"You see, even you, the great chief, had to stop talking to take care of the baby. In any home, in any village, the baby is truly great because even the greatest and most powerful chief, like you, must become the baby's servant. This is how the creator planned it. The creator did not make you great so that you could boast about your greatness. The Creator made you great so that you could help others who are not as strong as you." And from that day on no one ever heard the chief boast again.

This story perfectly illustrates the one way that Jesus calls us to be number one and that is by reordering our priorities. Jesus calls us to be first in love. Jesus says to us, "I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do." In this way Jesus gave us a new definition of greatness.

So, let us be great. Let us be great not in the size of our bank account, or other material entanglements that want us to lord it over others. Rather, let us be great servants. Great servants of the poor. Servants of those in need and servants of one another. But most of all servants of Christ. Amen.