

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Mom likes me best!” “I am my teacher’s favorite student!” “I am the Most Valuable Player.” I tend to roll my eyes when someone prances around and boasts about how they are more important than everyone else? It appears to be part of our human nature to jockey for position. Where am I in the pecking order? Who’s the greatest? Who’s the most loved? And on and on.

Jockeying for position does not always bring out the best in a person. Envy manifests itself in hurtful language, offensive behavior, and even betrayal.

Everyone wants to have a sense of value, to be appreciated, and to ‘rise to the top.’ It can’t be denied that it is really nice to hear, “You are the best mom ever!” There is nothing wrong about trying to be your best. Actually, it’s encouraged. But, when it becomes self-centered, a competition, a fight, prideful, resulting in the alienation of others, we become self-inflated and arrogant beings. As much as we try, no one is immune from the temptations associated with pride.

Back in 1st Century Israel, a rabbi was considered among the elite, knowledgeable and faithful to Judaism. He was pretty high in the pecking order. To be a disciple of a rabbi, one had to be hand-selected by him, and had to be the best among the best academically and faithfully. They had to know Torah by heart – every chapter, every verse.

They followed closely behind the rabbi, watching and emulating his every move (this will become important – so hang on to this little nugget). There was no jockeying for position. They simply had to be the best!

But then we look at Jesus and his disciples. Just as any rabbi would select his students, we know that Jesus hand-picked his disciples. Scripture makes it pretty clear that these guys were not the best of the best. They didn't know Torah, they were not well versed in "the Law," and they may not have been the brightest students in the class. As a matter of fact, they were often portrayed as a group of 'anybodies.' The evangelists noted time and time again how the disciples misunderstood Jesus' mission. And, prior to the story in today's Gospel, these hand-picked disciples (these anybodies) were arguing about who was the greatest – jockeying for position. Jesus had been cluing them in that things were likely going to get ugly. Trouble was brewing. The future of Jesus' ministry was at stake, and these guys were worried about who was the most important?

So, in today's Gospel, Jesus instructs them about what it means to be the greatest. Jesus' disciples have been hanging around him for three years. They have heard his words, witnessed his actions, and received his love. Jesus' actions were never contradictory to His message of forgiveness, hope, and love. In John's Gospel, Jesus tells us that if we know him, we know God. His message gives us the knowledge of God, and his actions reflect the actions of God.

After hanging around with Jesus for three years, one would think that his disciples would ‘know’ him in a deep and profound way, but yet, they often missed the point.

So, they find themselves in the upper room, a mere 24 hours before Jesus will be issued a death sentence. Jesus, who reflected God’s love, mercy and forgiveness, will become a condemned criminal. Knowing that His death is immanent, He leaves the future of His Church to this group of ‘anybodies’. Do these guys truly understand the magnitude of what the knowledge with which Jesus entrusted them? Were they able to embrace the power of Christ’s love? Do they have the courage to take the knowledge they have and to put it into action? Today, Jesus sends his final message.

In my feeble attempt to put Jesus’ message into a modern context, it could sound something like this:

Whether you realize it or not, things are about to get ugly. As your teacher, allow me to give you one final example that summarizes all of my teachings over the last three years. You have been with me, hearing my words and bearing witness to my actions. You have seen me offer mercy, and not render judgment. You have seen me leave the window of repentance open for everyone.

I know you have been jockeying to find your position as my disciples, but I have to tell you, it doesn’t matter. If you wish to be great, then you must take all

of the knowledge that I shared with you, all of the love that I gave you, carry it forward, and put it into action. Keeping this knowledge and love to yourself will never make even a small impact on the world. It must be shared – given away – given away by you – willingly – as a self-gift.

Let me show you. Washing someone's feet was a job for servants or slaves. The master of the house would never even consider washing the feet of another person. One's feet are often the most soiled, banged up, and smelly part of a person. It was left for the most humble and least among us to perform. And, therefore, we must do it.

You must have the heart of a servant, willing to abandon status and pride, and put your love for each other into action. You must be willing to get on your hands and knees and be a servant to even the greatest sinners. To truly be my disciple, you must do as I do, be willing to give your life as a gift of yourself to all. You must get your hands dirty, tolerate criticism and judgment for going against social norms, serve each other, and live in love. You will understand what I mean by this soon.

But for now, you must wash the feet of each other, to experience humility, and to accept being a servant. To lead others towards the Kingdom, you must be their servant!

Peter, you suggested that I should not only wash your feet, but to bathe your entire body. But there is no need to bathe entirely. You see, bathing has already been done. You've been baptized and initiated as Children of God. But, as all people do, you have sinned, and some of you will sin grievously. Your hands and feet will be soiled. Evil acts will be performed by your hands and put into motion by your feet. And your hands and feet will need to be washed in order to restore your cleanliness. But, as you have been taught, you will not be condemned by me, but rather given every opportunity to repent and seek forgiveness. My Father will, in His love, readily forgive you, and wash away your iniquities, simply by owning up to it and accepting His grace.

In your call to be my disciple, in what you have seen, in what you know of me, and the love you have received from me – you must put my message into action. Wash each other's hands and feet in my Name, forgive each other, love each other, and spread all that you have learned to the ends of the earth. You must show that my Father's forgiveness and mercy are without bounds, and loves you immeasurably. So, offer yourself freely! Show your greatness through being a servant. Turn all you have come to know about me and the Father, and love one another as I have loved you! Amen.