

“Most Likely To Succeed”

I don't know about you, but in the Gospel reading today, I'm with the disciples. If I were to be honest, I want to be right up front...not at the end of the line. Frankly, I've noticed that if you wait politely until the end of the line to get food here at church functions, you sometimes get nothing at all. In high school, when you voted on senior superlatives, (you know, “Funniest,” “Class Clown,” “Best Dressed”) - I was voted “Most Likely to Succeed.” I wasn't sure what I wanted to be at 18, but I was sure I'd be terrific at it.

My definitions of “success” have changed in the nearly 20 years since graduation. I chose to be a full-time parent for most of my daughter's life, I gave up my full-time paid work, and I began working for my family, and for God. (I was lucky to be able choose to do that – many people – mothers and fathers – don't have that choice.) I noticed that when I was a parent with a very small child, a “successful” day can be one where you managed to get everyone dressed and fed! Today, just like most of us, I struggle regularly with learning how to value the work that I do as a parent and as a deacon. Most of the way we value work today is by comparing paychecks, or titles. These days, my paycheck has an awful lot of zeroes in it – and those zeros aren't preceded by anything. I admit I occasionally long to return to the ‘rat race,’ and find easy answers in my search for self-validation. But then, (to paraphrase Lily Tomlin), if I'm only focused on winning the rat race, then I'm nothing more than a prizewinning rat.

Apparently, success doesn't come from doing, but from being. So, how do I, in this short life, be who God intends me to be? Or, as Jesus suggests, how do I learn to be last in line, and not first? And that isn't just my own personal challenge – it's the same question that puzzles the disciples, the same questions that church leaders wrestle with, and young adults ponder as they try to make sense of their one life on this planet. We all have a deep longing to discover the answer to: “Who does God mean for me to be?”

After all, we're all pretty happy to achieve, to do great things, to BE great. Our society is addicted to “great,” and we turn around and pass that same addiction to our children. When was the last time you sent your child to the relay line, and told them to come in dead last? We push our children to the most, do it all, be the best, be outstanding, get in to

the best school, be better than the others, make more money, all so we can improve our place in line. (or, so they can put us all into the very best retirement home possible). We want to be the best in ministry – whether it's obtaining the best leadership, or building the best building, serving the best food, having the finest facilities, the most entertaining services, the best parties....

All this addiction to “being the best” can be traced back as far as Cain whacking Abel over the head. Abel had more favor with God, so with one swift ‘thwack,’ Cain moved up in line...or thought he did, at least. Even the book of James offers an analysis of the unease of our times: “Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.... These conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from their cravings that are at war within you?” (You'd think the writer sat in on a recent town meeting, or maybe a Senate hearing!)

It's the same simple argument the disciples are having – “on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.” Rather than rolling his eyes, or even rebuking them, Jesus calls them over and offers them instruction. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all.” Notice he doesn't say do, but BE. He's not asking us first to look at actions, but at identity. Who are we to be in our relationship with God, and with each other? Jesus says we must be last. So how do we “be last?”

Jesus tells his disciples, and us: "Be servant of all." Notice that he does not say servant TO all, but servant OF all, which suggests that the disciples are called to be servant leaders together – they are to share the load, not shoulder the burden individually. Discipleship is more like a family, a group of people working toward a common goal, for the good of all. It's not a hierarchical corporate structure, with one group or individual holding power over others. There is no C.E.O. among the disciples of God.

Then, Jesus offers us a personal and intimate example. He brings a small child into the center of the room, a child small enough to rest in his arms. When Jesus does that, he's pulling someone from the sidelines to the center of the story. Children were cherished then, just as they are today, but they lived lives very different – and even more precarious – than children of today. Some estimates of child mortality put the death rate for children of Jesus' time at 50%. If you had four children, chances were that only two would live to adulthood. People loved their children – but their children were the ones who were most vulnerable to disease and famine and warfare. They worked alongside their parents from an early age, but they had no rights to property or wages – even a slave could own a blan-

ket or a basket – but not children. If you wanted to punish an enemy, you waged war against their herds of animals, and their children.

Jesus pulls the child to the center of the conversation to illustrate his point to the quarrelling disciples. “Whoever must be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Children were the last, the least, the weakest, the most vulnerable. Maybe what Jesus is asking of us is something that simple. Notice the unnoticable, pull them into the light, and love them enough to do something about their situation.

So do we have the courage to live into the answers Jesus gives us? Do we have the courage to be last? How do we model what greatness REALLY looks like as a community of Christ? We can create a safe place to explore what God calls each of us to be. We can spend time asking difficult questions, and not settling for easy answers. And we can look to children and young people not only an example, but as a part of the community, with full voice in the workings of the church. We can pull people from the margins into the center, bring them from the dark to the light, give them voices, power and a place to speak, even when we don't agree with them. We can offer one other love and respect – hard love, not the silly sentimental kind, but the kind with legs and feet. We can share our work – empowering others to step forward to serve. And we can work toward learning to be servants of all, working together toward the vision Christ gives us for the church.

None of those things are easy. We might lose some of our upward mobility. We might have some friends think we've gone off our rocker. We might no longer be “the best”. It's likely we will no longer have the nicest car, and the best wardrobe, or the shiniest corner office with the terrific view. But to deny Jesus' call is to deny our own inner yearning, to deny our Gospel call to be the people God means for us to be. Let's all go home and toss our “Most Likely to Succeed” trophies in the trash, and dare to come in last.

— *With thanks to The Rev. Stephen Lewis, who gave me great food for thought*