

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

The words at the end of our Gospel text come as a shock to our American ears. To be first, you've got to be last and servant? Nobody strives to be last! Nobody strives to be in the cellar, to bring up the rear, to be the *Lanterne Rouge* (that's the last place in the Tour de France). And it's not just an American psyche. It's all around the world.

Consider our schools. Do you want your kids or grandkids to be in a class where it's evident that there are high standards of learning or not? Do you want them in a classroom where there is active engagement of student with student or student with teacher, where connections are made to real-life experiences, and so forth, or not? Do you want them in a classroom where their progress is monitored and feedback provided regularly or not? Do you want them in a well-managed classroom where rules are followed and people are respectful or not? Do you want them in a classroom where all this is "very evident" or "not observed" at all?

The answer is obvious, I think: *"Yes, yes. This is the kind of classroom, teaching, environment that I want for my child or grandchild."* But then you might ask, *"How does this happen, if you're supposed to be last?"*

Well, fret not. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is not talking about being first and last as men might view them, where we might use a bit of Lake Wobegon-like braggadocio, *"where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."* No, Jesus is talking about being first and last as He reckons us.

Of course, this is such a thing as being first in the eyes of men. And I submit, that in this way, with regard to your neighbor, this is how you are servant of all. So striving to be the best teacher you can be does indeed serve the little children that the Lord gives us charge over. Being an incompetent plumber does not serve your neighbor, or being an inept auto mechanic. When you go to the doctor, you want someone at the top of his profession, don't you?—that's who really serves you; not the one who gives you substandard care. So also for you, in whatever vocation the Lord has called you to: you are called to be the best that you can be, and thereby to serve your neighbor to the best of your ability.

Jesus Himself uses the example of the little child in the Gospel, which is why the school and teaching example is so apropos. Jesus doesn't call the child to Himself simply as a metaphor. He wants us to care for children—like we do at our school; and we do that best not only when we teach them their "three R's" with excellence, but also when we *"receive [them] in His name"*; that is, when we give them Jesus, when by His word we make Him known, and they are received into the fellowship of the Holy Trinity — whether that's at Lutheran South or when the

Thurgood Marshall kids come over here for iCAN. It's why the "Let the Children Come" fundraiser is so important, and our own Gala to support our school. With that child, Jesus was giving us a "living illustration" of who is first in the kingdom of heaven, and He gives us encouragement in our service.

But, of course, we too are called "*children of God*" as we believe in Him. St. John says, He gives to all who receive Him "*the right to become children of God*"; He calls us His children as He gives us birth into Him in the waters of Holy Baptism. He calls us His children as an expression of His love for us, His will for us, chosen in Christ Jesus for adoption as sons, having received the Spirit of adoption as sons.

And there is nothing to brag about here. It's God's work, and with this adoption, of course, we are heaven-bound. And so we are called to humility before God — childlike humility; "*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*"

But that's just what we find so difficult. Even the disciples found it difficult. Thus they were pridefully discussing and arguing about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom. And you know that they knew they had messed up. When Jesus asked them what they were discussing, they didn't answer Him but stayed silent — almost like a child does when you catch him red-handed: "*What are you doing?*" "*I dunno.*" But they do know; it's just their guilt that keeps them from answering.

But this is not just difficult for children; this is difficult for us, for who are we? We're God's children, but we're also sinners. We're "*double-minded*," St. James says. Our "*passions are at war within [us]*." We're called to "*[c]leanse [our] hands ... and purify [our] hearts Be wretched and mourn and weep,*" because "*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*" I submit, we can't even get that right.

In our double-mindedness, we're so wretched that we even take pride in our humility. We boast in the supposed fact that our "*left hand [does not] know what [our] right hand is doing.*" We puff out our chest at the prayers that we say behind closed doors or the good deeds we do at holiday time. We deceive ourselves into thinking God will give us a special place in the kingdom for the things we have done.

Let us repent of our false modesty that masks our selfish ambitions that really seek the same greatness as the disciples did; let us repent of our boasting in our selves when it comes to God. And in the purity of the wisdom from above, let us boast in the Lord alone, and proclaim Him. Let us receive this heavenly wisdom found in Christ alone who has become our "*righteousness and sanctification and*

redemption.” Let us partake of this wisdom from above as the word of truth is “*preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people,*” that we “*in steadfast faith may serve [Him] and, in the confession of [His] name, abide unto the end.*”

It is this wisdom-wrought faith in “[t]he Son of Man” who was “*delivered into the hands of men,*” and killed, and “*after three days*” rose from the dead that reckons us as first in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus Himself would become the greatest fool in the eyes of the world, going to a cross not for Himself but for us, that He might become for us the wisdom of God. In this wisdom we are reckoned first. He Himself would undergo weakness and poverty and death that He might deliver unto us His power, His riches, and His life. He Himself would become the last and the least and the lowest, that we might be reckoned the first and the greatest and the exalted. He Himself would become the servant of all, that He might pay the ransom price for our sins, for our selfish ambition, for our false humility.

Oh, the true humility of “*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*” This is no false humility. Jesus did not scorn death. No one took His place on the cross, but He took yours, and bore the sins that are yours, that your sins might be forgiven, that you, who bend the knee in homage before Him, might also be highly exalted—accounted first in the kingdom of heaven.

So God help us in our repentance. Grant that our humility may not be feigned, but true. Grant that our faith may be shown by works done “*in the meekness of wisdom.*” Grant that our “*attitude [might] be the same*” as Christ Jesus’, considering ourselves last of all, and a servant of all the neighbors God places in our lives, in our homes, in our workplaces, in our church and school, and in the world. Grant that we who have been set free from sin by His name, might likewise use our freedom to serve in His name, leading to a harvest of righteousness.

We pray, God grant this, for this too is the wisdom that comes down from above. And the strength comes from above, too, as we come to the holy altar to partake of Christ’s body and blood. In this Sacrament, we not only receive the fruit of His service to us in the forgiveness of our sins, as He reckons us first in the kingdom of heaven, but He also strengthen us in our faith and our faithful service to others. The Lord preserve us in this faith that truly reckons ourselves last of all and servant of all, but that rejoices that we are reckoned by our servant Savior as first in the kingdom of heaven.

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