

**Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
(Sept. 20, 2009)**

Who's the Greatest?

Most of us remember the boxer Muhammed Ali who famously declared “I am the greatest” after a stunning victory. Well the disciples in our Gospel story sound a little bit like him as they quarrel with one another about precisely who is the greatest.

Recently I read a very imaginative attempt to break open the passage you just heard from Mark's Gospel. (Joseph Donders, *Praying and Preaching the Sunday Gospel*, pp. 141-42.) It's rather entertaining and does help to bring home the message. It goes like this:

They could not have been walking with him. They must have been walking behind him, or maybe in front of him. They were discussing their relationships with him. They were discussing their importance according to him. We don't know exactly what they said. But we can guess what it was all about.

Peter said, “Of course, without any doubt, I am the most important. Didn't he call me the rock on which that community of his is going to be built?”

John said, “I'm sorry for you. What you said might be true, but that is only a question of administrative bureaucracy. The fact that you might be a good administrator doesn't make you the most important one. You should look for something else. You should be attentive to something more important. You should look for his love, and if you do that, well, he loves me the most.”

Then Judas spoke. He said, “The most important person is the man with the money. You don't need to be a Marxist or a capitalist to know that. The world is ruled by money, and to whom did he entrust his money? To me, and that's why I'm the most important.”

Philip spoke. “All that is very nice. Do you remember when he had that catering problem in the desert with all those thousands, when nobody knew what to do, including himself? He turned to me for advice. I'm sorry for you, but he asked me.”

Jesus must have walked ahead of them or behind them during that conversation, having his own thoughts, his own sentiments, while they had theirs.

What might Jesus have been thinking about? Well he had just told them for the second time that he was going to suffer and die and rise again on the third day. And they didn't get it. They just didn't get it. He might have been disappointed that they really didn't know him at all or understand what he was all about. Perhaps he was bit sad as he heard them arguing about who would be the most important in the Kingdom. And so he decided to teach them a lesson. He did something startling – which was not at all unusual when Jesus wanted to get across an idea. He put a little child in their midst, put his arms around the child and said, “Whoever welcomes a child such as this for my sake welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes, not me, but the one who sent me.”

Now in the Jewish culture of Jesus' time, children were not counted important at all. And the Roman culture where the people lived who would read Mark's Gospel, saw them as even less important. But Jesus says, “This is the sort of person that represents me – and in representing me, also represents my Father.” The lesson, of course, is that the most important people are the little people, the seemingly unimportant, not just children, but the poor, the weak, the needy, those most dependent on others the way children depend on their parents.

The author I cited in the beginning, continuing his imaginative reflection, has this to say about what Jesus was doing:

He came to them, holding a child by the hand, one he had found in the street, a small girl with a running nose and pitch-black eyes. He put the girl in the middle of their circle and said: “Do you see her?” Of course they did. He put his hands on her, he greeted her, he kissed her and said, “Whoever receives a child like this, breaking open the circle in which he or she lives, is receiving me, and not only me, but the one who sent me.”

He looked at them and sent the girl around their circle. I don't know what they did. Maybe Peter gave her a pat on the shoulders. Maybe John kissed her on both cheeks. Maybe Judas gave her a coin, and Philip put her on his knee while he dried her nose.

If they received that small girl in all sincerity that evening, they must

have been filled – according to his word – with God’s self, and a question like, “Who is the most important?” did not make any sense any more.

In the second reading from the Letter of James we heard a very sobering and serious application of what Jesus is teaching here. James says, “Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice. . . . Where do the wars and conflicts and dissensions among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members?” James could well be addressing many situations that exist in our world today. Many years ago when I was a student of theology at Woodstock College, Fr. John Courtney Murray, one of our teachers, used to lament the lack of civility in public discourse. I hesitate to even guess how he would feel if he were alive today. In an issue of *America* magazine published some years ago Cardinal McCarrick had an article in which he calls for restoring civility to political discourse. Interestingly and appropriately enough the article is based on a sermon he preached at a gathering of Catholic members of the U.S. Congress. What a boon it would be if our Catholic members of Congress could give an example to all the others of polite, respectful, and civil discourse. We might get to the point where people contending for public office or wrestling with the question of health care reform would no longer need to resort to name-calling and dirty tactics to support their campaigns or political positions. “A consummation devoutly to be wished.” Maybe we could all get to the point where we could look at one another and instead of wanting to say, “I am the greatest” say with sincerity and humility, “You are the greatest.”