

Homily given on September 23, 2018, by Father Jim McLean at St. Christopher's:

You can't complain about the Gospel lesson being too long. It's seven sentences—which is pretty brief. And Jesus speaks three short sentences. *But* they are as substantial as they are succinct.

The disciples and Jesus have been on the road and in this story they come to a house that was on or near the Sea of Galilee. And if your knowledge of the map of Israel is, like mine, a little sketchy, they were about eighty miles north of Jerusalem. About from Northport to Cadillac. So there they were, resting from their travels—and they had a long way to go to get to Jerusalem. Eighty miles on foot seems quite a ways to me.

So then Jesus—for no apparent reason—asks a question. He says, “What were you arguing about on the way?” And their response is interesting. Their response is . . . nothing. Mark says, “They were silent.” And then Mark says, “. . . on the way they'd argued with one another about who was the greatest.” I take that to mean that when Jesus asked what they were arguing about, he actually knew. And they felt a little chagrined when he called them out.

What Jesus overheard was an argument about status, about rank, about prestige, about seniority, and about ultimate importance. Mark, the narrator of the story, doesn't quote what they said. BUT if they were arguing about status and rank and prestige and ultimate importance, I gotta believe that they must've argued about the peripheral stuff, like who gets the best seats at the banquets, who gets invited to the best parties and who doesn't, who gets picked up in the bullet-proof Lincoln, and who gets picked up in the Ford SUV. Who gets three secretaries and two assistants and who gets a part-time receptionist. To a lotta folks, the peripheral stuff not only matters but it matters a lot. It goes right along with status and rank and prestige. So I assume that Jesus got an earful about all that as he listened in on the disciples haggling about who was the greatest among them.

So now, to me, it's interesting what Jesus did NOT say, like what the disciples did NOT say. Sometimes that can be just as important as what you DO say. Poor Jesus was surrounded by petty bickering and inflated egos. So answer me this: What would you say when you're surrounded by self-centered jerks? I know what you'd say, because it's also what I'd say. And like you, I'd say either, "Knock it off," or "Grow up," or "Get a life," or "You're all so conceited."

But from the mouth of Jesus came NO rebuke, NO reprimand, and No scolding. I think he let 'em off easy. But what he did say to them was "classic Jesus". He hit them with, would you believe it, two paradoxes. And my own thought is that they went to their graves never forgetting what he said.

Okay—brief time out; last Sunday if you weren't here—and if you were—paradox was explained—paradox seems at first wrong, dumb, or odd, but closer examination proves it to be right. St. Paul says, "Wherever I'm weak, then I'm strong." Sounds wrong but Paul says in weakness your greatest strengths become apparent. Correct after all. A paradox cracks open the truth so you can hold onto it—that's why there are so many in the Holy Scripture.

So get ready, here's the first paradox the disciples heard—paradox number one, in my own translation:

"Fellas, the first is gonna be last and the last is gonna be first."

Sounds odd—but Jesus was saying something about leadership in the kingdom, which I also believe applies to any kind of leadership. He was saying that whoever sits in the corner office, whoever is the number one person, must have his heart set on the people who are at the bottom of the ladder. And NOT because you feel sorry for them—but, rather, because they are important and worthy of your respect.

So, they got set straight—leadership in the kingdom, being at the helm, means focusing on the last. Or as Jesus said succinctly, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." It's really true in the world of leadership.

The best illustration of this outside the Bible, in my opinion, is an article that appeared in the Business Section of the *New York Times* two years ago. It's an interview with a business executive that appears in the *Times'* Sunday edition—it's a column called "The Corner Office"—meaning the plush executive suite. The person interviewed was the president of *Charles Schwab*. So, his corner office was most likely pretty plush. The interviewer asked the *Schwab* president what he learned in college. And he recalled a doozie.

His senior year as a business major he had a 4.0 grade average and he wanted to make it to graduation with a perfect transcript of all A's. He faced a final exam in his toughest course, which was "Business Strategy", which I assume means devising a series of business plans with a means of implementation—so that could cover business law, advanced economics, international finance, the whole deal. The future president of *Charles Schwab* studied furiously. The professor passed out ONE sheet of paper and asked them to turn it over. To his amazement, both sides were blank. The professor said this: "I've taught you everything I can teach you in the last ten weeks, but the most important message, the most important question is this: What's the name of the lady who cleans this building?"

So, he did not make an A in the course. His 4.0 average was gone. But he did learn the name of the lady who cleaned the building—Dottie. He said, "I'd seen her, but I'd never taken the time to ask her name. I've tried to know every Dottie I've worked with ever since." What a wise professor. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Even in corporate America.

But Jesus had another arrow in his quiver, that is, another paradox. He took an infant in his arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Let's bring that home: Jesus is saying that if you welcome and receive an infant who poops and pees all day long and demands constant attention, then you've also received God. The paradox to end all paradoxes.

It doesn't even appear rational, let alone true. Nothing is more vulnerable than a human infant. Our culture has imprinted on our brain that to be vulnerable is a sign of weakness. The truth is that vulnerability is a sure sign and manifestation of the truth and of strength.

To be vulnerable is to take risks, like Jesus. To be vulnerable is the willingness to show up and the willingness to tell the truth when nobody wants to hear it, like Jesus.

I've mentioned to you before the work of Brene' Brown, a researcher and author, who's written lots about vulnerability. And she has many wise things to say. She says, "Vulnerability is not weakness: it's our most accurate measure of courage." I believe she's right.

I attended the General Convention of the Episcopal Church many years ago in New Orleans and Archbishop Desmond Tutu was invited to be an honored guest. Very big deal. He didn't come—his government wouldn't let him out of South Africa. His government didn't want him criticizing Apartheid all over the world. Which, he most surely would have done. Needless to say, the government that wouldn't let Bishop Tutu come to New Orleans, the same government that jailed Nelson Mandela for 27 years, is no more. It is long gone, buried by a massive revolt. It was a revolt of non-violence. When you look down the barrels of many rifles and say, "We oppose everything you believe and will oppose you non-violently," you will then see what being vulnerable looks and feels like.

You *could* say that because the evils of the old government were dismantled, that vulnerability works. You could say that and you'd have a point. But it's so much more. Vulnerability is not something to *do* but a way to *be*.

So Jesus said to his quarreling disciples, "The first comes last and the last first." And while they weren't understanding that, he said, "Whoever embraces this little kid embraces God." It may well be that they never quite got what Jesus meant until well after his death. But in the kingdom, it is never too late.

The last come first and the first come last. Embracing a child is embracing God. A little odd and very true.

Amen.