

It seems to begin as we are emerging from the womb. Instantaneously, we are surrounded by a herd of hands, a huddle of humans, who coo over us and respond to our every expression and slightest movement. Everyone and everything in the world comes right to us. The attention continues through our infancy and often into our early childhood years. How would it be possible for any of us to not begin life with the belief that we are the center of the universe?

Years ago, there was a movie that gained much notoriety because it contained no dialogue at all. It was about an ancient clan in a prehistoric civilization and the driving force that controlled their lives. Anybody remember it? It was called *Quest For Fire*. It was an interesting concept, but I would argue that there is an even more basic need for humans than a quest for fire. It is a Quest for Recognition. From the time following our infancy, all of us are attempting to regain that feeling that the sun revolves around us. All of us want attention. All of us want to be noticed. There is good reason to believe that more than anything else, our actions are influenced most by our desire to stand out among the crowd. For each of us, life centers around a quest for recognition, a desire to separate ourselves from the crowd, to stand out as the leader, or the winner or the champion.

Now if this sounds to you to be a cynical reaction to human nature, I ask you to consider every aspect of life around us. First, it seems like we cannot take a single step in America without being bombarded by advertising in every imaginable form. With the

possible exception of this place here, where we have yet to allow a corporate sponsor to rename our church, we are totally surrounded by advertising day and night. (By the way, how does Bank of the West Episcopal Church sound to all of you?) Now upon what is all this advertising almost exclusively based? On making you feel like the coolest dude in the world. Why do you need to buy a Lexus? So you can be head and shoulders above the crowd? Why do you need a \$500 dress or suit? Because you deserve it, because you are special and you should be recognized as special.

It is not just what we are told to buy either. Almost synonymous with being American is being upwardly mobile. Our goal in life is to gain more power and more prestige so that others look up to us. All of us are supposed to climb the ladder and never take steps down, whether that is a corporate, political or non-profit ladder. If we are head of our department, we are not supposed to rest until we are president of the company. If we are a Congressperson, we need to be Senators. If we are priests, we need to be Bishops. If we are teachers, we need to strive to be superintendents. All of us are supposed to get all A's on our report cards and all of us are supposed to be the quarterback who throws the winning touchdown on the last play of the game.

If you think you are exempt from the quest for recognition, I ask you to honestly think about how you respond to praise, or the lack of it. I will confess first. This thing I do up here, this sermonizing thing, is a heck of a lot of work, at least if it is done well. Each and every week in between pastoral care and counseling and the myriad other things that it takes to run a church, I spend hours and hours studying the lessons, reading commentaries, analyzing other sermons, paying attention to the world around us,

interpreting the Biblical text to our situation in Page at this moment, and then bringing all that information together. I then attempt to craft a coherent sermon from all that information, choosing every word very carefully, because I want to knock your socks off every single week, and bring you closer to God and each other. When that effort produces absolutely nothing, it is like someone has kicked me in the stomach and thrown me down a flight of stairs. But when one person is moved by that experience, everything is right in the world again.

My guess is that this is not just the overly sensitive reaction of a prima donna priest. My gut tells me that each one of you feels the same way when it happens to you. It is simply human nature, built into our DNA.

That is why I believe the knee jerk reaction I have had when hearing today's Gospel over the years has been misplaced. I don't know about the rest of you, but I have always wanted to chastise James and John for their selfish, ego-centric approach with Jesus. How dare those arrogant son of a guns ask Jesus for positions of power in his Cabinet. Who the heck do they think they are? You will notice that their fellow disciples had a similar reaction when they found out about their request to Jesus.

But the truth is, all of us are James and John. All of us want to be the best in our fields. All of us want to be on top. All of us want to be praised by others for what we have done. My heavens, not only is it in our DNA, but apparently it is also in God's. Certainly God's reaction to Job in today's first reading sounds an awful lot like a quest for recognition to me. I picture God blasting those words to Job like the grand and powerful OZ. "Where in the world were you, Job, when I was putting the universe together? What

do you think you know about it? I'm the one that did it all." And if we are really images of God, how could we expect to be any different?

The problem though, is that this instinct of ours, does create some issues. On an individual level, our quest often creates severe personality concerns. An unchecked quest for recognition leads to self-centeredness, arrogance and out of control egos. It creates the people none of us can stand to be around, those folks who just cannot think or talk about anyone but themselves. It creates the priest lampooned on the front cover of your bulletin, the person who splashes their degrees and titles all over their business cards and their email accounts, who can't figure out why people in their congregation find them unapproachable and why they can't seem to attract hard working, blue collar people to "their" church.

The quest for praise is also what has created some of the worst social ills in the world today. It is the impetus, for example, for gang mentality. Kids that join gangs are ones who are desperately seeking approval and recognition. The gang gives them a place where they are accepted and set apart from the crowd. For the first time in their lives, someone is praising them.

Psychologists suggest that our quest for recognition is also behind much of the crime committed in the world today. It is a desperate attempt by an individual to get attention from a world that does not see them or respond to them.

Finally, our quest for recognition builds walls between us, sometimes literal ones. It creates all kinds of exclusivism as people actually begin to think they are better than others and then feel a need to segregate themselves from others. When I was a kid in

Maryland, there was this exclusive development on top of a hill, that separated itself from the common folk living below by a wall. I'm sure the developer of the exclusive neighborhood later kicked himself, because he named the place Nob Hill, and proudly displayed it on that exclusive wall. But invariably, the riff-raff below would come and continually paint a big "S" in front of the "N", no matter how many times it was removed. Sometimes our quest for recognition makes all of us snobs.

This is also a huge danger in the church, especially our church. Because Episcopal clergy have always been well trained and highly educated, people often saw and sometimes still see our church as elitist, as we talked about last week. Another way that we put walls between us and others.

Our quest for recognition has been instrumental in all forms of segregation, of racism and classism and sexism. And of course, this quest is what creates the great struggles among nations, when one country arrogantly begins to believe that they are better than everyone else. We won't mention any names.

It seems only too obvious then, that what each of us must do to defeat this menace in our lives is to stop being so self-centered, to let go of this quest for recognition. That is why when James and John so brashly ask Jesus to be on his right hand and his left, all of us know what is coming. Jesus is going to castigate them for their arrogance and selfishness.

But, as he so often does, Jesus fools us once again. He does not at all suggest to James and John that they are wrong to strive for excellence. He tells them how difficult the path will be, that it will lead to death and pain and suffering. But he never tells them to

stop their quest. Instead, what Jesus tells them and us is that the problem is not our human nature, our quest for recognition, but rather what we choose to do to gain that recognition.

What he tells us not to do is what he notes that the power driven cultures around him did with their quest for recognition. They “lord it over people”, Jesus tells them. They become tyrants. They create a hierarchical system with them on the top of the pyramid, and then they take advantage of those under them. They use it as a way to have power over others.

It does not have to be that way, Jesus tells us. We can be different. All of us, he suggests, should continue on our quest for recognition. But for us, achieving recognition must have nothing to do with thinking we are better than someone else. Real recognition, he teaches us, is when we avoid any form of hierarchy or steps between us and them. Our quest for recognition must be based on creating a system where there is no top and no bottom. We need to be recognized for raising everyone up to greatness by being their servant. We become great when we create a world based not on the hierarchy model designed by humans, but on the model of the Body of Christ. This is a place where everyone has a job to do, not one of which is more or less important than another.

It is this message of Jesus and his life example of living like this, that the world continues to reject. We have lived so long in a world, a nation, a community, a church and a family of hierarchy, that it has convinced us that this is the only path to greatness. We hear Jesus speak of being a servant to all, but can't actually accept that such a system could allow anyone to achieve greatness.

But consider a man who was born in the back of beyond to a dirt poor unwed teenage mother. Consider a man who worked in total obscurity until the age of 30. Consider a man who worked as a soapbox preacher, who never got a degree, never took a sabbatical to write a book, never held an office. He spent his days with a bunch of smelly fisherman and women he was not supposed to hang around. He never reached down to anyone, but always across, responding to everyone as his equal and with full dignity. He used civil disobedience to change the hierarchical system that allowed people to be abused. He was called every name in the book and finally he was humiliated and tortured like a common criminal.

But 50, 100, 300, 500, 1000, and 2000 years later, who is it that we remember? We might recall the names of a couple Caesars, but not much more than their names. Who is it that changed the world and became the most influential person of all time? The one who lead by serving, the one who achieved the greatest recognition of all time because he avoided trickle down everything.

Beloved, it works. In the human hierarchy model, there are only so many kings, so many presidents, so many batters who can hit the game winning homerun in the bottom of the ninth inning in the seventh game of the world series. There are only so many seats at the head tables in our lives. But in the world that Jesus envisions, every single one of us can be recognized, every single one of us can achieve greatness, because there are no reserved seats. There is no upwardly mobile path for us to follow, no ladder of success from which we need to push off our competitors. There is no such thing as trickle-down economics or corporate ladders. All of us have the opportunity to be great because all of

us can serve one another, and when we do, we create the world that Jesus imagined.

Beloved, this is not some pie in the sky dream. This change in worldview is achievable. But to do so, not only must all of us be servants to one another, but we must also resist every form of hierarchy everywhere we see it, from family life, to church life, to nation building to world structures. We need to put an end once and for all to the so called family values notion that says that a father is the ultimate authority figure in a household. That is the beginning of the “power over” hierarchy system that Jesus rejects today and throughout the Gospels when he leaves fathers off the lists of kingdom of God participants, as he did in last week’s Gospel. We also need to reject church structures that in any way separate laity from clergy or Bishops from the people. We need to remember that elected people in America are not gods, but are our servants to do the will of the people. We need to reject any structure that does not hold up all nations as equal participants on the world stage.

By eliminating hierarchy, we will create the kingdom that Jesus envisions, a place where each of us will be recognized for our greatness, as we serve each other and bring equality to each other, knocking down every wall that divides us, and creating a world where all of us are affirmed and loved. Amen.