

Proper 20 (18th Sunday after Pentecost)
September 20, a.D. 2009
Mark 9: 30 – 37

In our celebrity obsessed culture, the leading reality T.V. shows seem to be the ones offering featuring lucrative deals through a series of auditions. One of them is “So you think you can dance, Canada”. No doubt there is some remarkable talent there, but I feel sorry for those contestants that try with all their heart but fail miserably. There they stand on center stage, embarrassed and now have to hear the judges criticisms.

What is it about failure that we don’t like to see in others or in ourselves? When pride is hurt and egos are bruised, it is time for comfort and efforts to encourage, prop up and to look for the sun above the rain clouds.

Jesus’ disciples went through such a time when they were not able to drive out a demon, which possessed a young boy. They could not get it done. Helpless and embarrassed they stood alone and admitted their failure. But Jesus did get it done. He rescued the young boy and restored him to his parents.

Then Jesus went to Capernaum. He moved on but his disciples could not forget their embarrassment. Emotionally they were stuck in their failure and could not move on. Egos bruised and pride hurting, they naturally began to talk along the road about the successes they did enjoy. That was soothing. Jesus did give them powers and they did enjoy a measure of success and that led them to discuss who among them was the greatest.

Herein is found a great irony. Jesus was leading them along God’s chosen path back to Jerusalem, right to his cross, where he would die. His chosen disciples were arguing who was the greatest in a feeble attempt to restore their dignity. The Lord’s words come to mind: The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

As Jesus was going to his death on the cross to rescue the world, his disciples were arguing about greatness and wanted to save themselves. Their world is no different than ours. In every situation, in the administration of justice, in the seating at mealtime, in all dealings and even in worship, there arose the question of who was the greater and who should receive the greater honour. Are we not all trapped either in a rescue mission

to save face or else running a marathon of good deeds to gain more recognition and praise?

Jesus deflates the huge ego and cuts down the fattened pride by taking a small child and pointing out that whoever receives a small child in his name, receives him and whoever receives him receives his father who sent him.

A small child is unassuming. Has no bruised ego to fix. Sure he has needs and wants. Once his needs are taken care of, he quickly forgets and goes his own way mostly without a word of thanks. But by serving a small child without the likely thanks and praise, Jesus said you are serving your father in heaven.

Being first by placing yourself beneath a small child, that is last, is the kind of wisdom that is found only in God's kingdom. It never comes from below but from heaven above. It uncovers our competitive pride to outdo others for awards and recognition. It holds out for us the Lord's suffering servant, Jesus, who single handedly reshaped the entire world, transforming it from selfish ambition to selfless serving and endless giving.

Jesus made you first in God's kingdom by putting himself last and giving up his last breath for you. He suffered and died for you so you don't have to rescue your reputation or fight for the world's honour. He frees you from the chains of wanting celebrity status and makes you a child of heaven by joining you to himself in holy baptism.

When he washed you clean through water and the word, he crucified your old nature which wants to step on others to get ahead, and gave you a child-like trust in God, who always forgives and loves.

Everything God demands of you, to be servant of all, was fulfilled by Jesus. He still makes you first in God's kingdom through his bitter suffering on the cross. Now you are raised to a new life with him that has no end.