

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It's here! The football season has begun. And along with it has come the relatively new phenomenon known as "Fantasy Football". Fortunes will be won and lost in people arguing over the best team of the week; the best quarterback; the fastest running back. Who's the greatest? Who's NUMBER 1! Is it Tom Brady, Aaron Rodgers, Ben Roethlesberger, Drew Brees, or Russell Wilson? Where is poor Sam Bradford in the mix? The arguments will be fierce. Passions will flare. And envy and jealousy and conflict of every kind will result.

Could it be that St. James wrote his letter to NFL fans today? Or was it to the international soccer fans across the globe? "Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members? You covet but do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war. You do not possess because you do not ask. You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

Well, truth be told, according to most Biblical scholars, St. James was speaking to the early Christian community in Jerusalem, specifically to those with wagging tongues. Earlier in this 3rd Chapter of his letter, James says, "The tongue defiles the entire body. Its flames encircle our course from birth, and its fire is kindled by hell. Every form of life, four-footed or winged, crawling or swimming, can be tamed, and has been tamed by mankind. The tongue no man can tame. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

Our Gospel text today suggests that Jesus had to face the same problem with his disciples. He had just taught them the meaning of his life, the mission he had to accomplish, "The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death the Son of Man will rise." So as they continue their journey, he hears them arguing and bickering. Can't you just imagine him saying to himself, "What now? What is their problem? Why can't they just get along?" And he listens but doesn't say anything as they walk on down the road.

Finally, they're home in Capernaum after at least a three-day-long walk. Now he asks them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" Interestingly, Mark tells us, "...they remained silent". Were they ashamed? Were they afraid if they told him that he would name the one who was the greatest? Or were they mad and still steaming at each other?

So, Jesus sits down and gathers the Twelve around him and says, "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all." Being a great teacher, he provides a visual aid. He takes a little child in his arms and says to them, "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me."

To understand this, you have to have a sense of how disvalued children were in that early Middle Eastern society. In both Jewish and Greco-Roman societies children were considered the least important human beings. Indeed, unwanted children were simply sold into slavery.

Notice Jesus does not discourage the ambitions of the Twelve. He simply points out that if you want to be first; if you want to be NUMBER 1, you must be willing to serve—and not just serve but serve the least and the smallest; the weakest and the most fragile.

Nor does Jesus condemn ambition. Ambition is an impulse that is God-given for self-improvement and improvement of society at large. A person with no ambition is a drag on society, the weak link, you might say, in the human enterprise.

On the contrary, Jesus is encouraging ambition. He says to the Twelve, but not only for them, “ANYONE who wants to be first must be the last of all, and the servant of all. He was making the point that greatness in his kingdom is determined by service and not be status. He was saying if you want to be first, here is what you must do. You must learn to serve others.

Actually Jesus was conducting one of history’s first success seminars. Every business person in the room knows it. If you want to be number one in business—get a reputation for service. When Thomas J. Watson, Sr. started IBM, he laid out the three core values of the company. Those values were excellent products and services; excellent customer service; and respect for the individual customer.

It’s important to note that there are two words in Greek that mean “servant”—“DIAKONOS” and “DOULOS”. “DOULOS” refers to one who acts out of servitude and under obligation and compulsion. “DIAKONOS”, which St. Mark uses, suggests one who attend to the needs of others freely, willingly, joyfully, and generously, out of a sense of love, not out of a sense of obligation.

God is not concerned about titles and position and status. He cares not if you are CEO or you’re the one who sweeps the floors. What qualifies you is a willingness to serve. In God’s kingdom, greatness is willingness to serve.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. interprets this passage this way, “True greatness comes not by favoritism, but by fitness...that’s your new definition of greatness, and by this definition everyone can be great. Because everyone can serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.”

The Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta put it more succinctly, “God does not choose the qualified, He qualifies the chosen.”

The point is that if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, whom you claim as your Lord and Savior, you must be willing to serve. Last week at our 11:00 A.M. Mass we had a mighty example of that in the 50 or so members who stepped forward to be ordained as catechists. We have many others who have offered themselves for various other ministries in our Church community.

But, unfortunately, there are too many here willing to sit back, do nothing, often criticizing those who do, and waiting to be waited on. A few weeks ago I told this story in my homily. Some may remember:

A priest-friend recently visited a fast-growing parish in Minnesota to learn from their staff. It was a privilege, he said, to witness their passion for doing high quality ministry in the name of Jesus. One of the phrases that he heard while he was there, was, “We want our members to wear aprons, not bibs.” That’s an interesting phrase—“APRONS, NOT BIBS!”

Here’s what they meant by it. Bibs are for people who only want to be fed.. Bibs are for those who are not yet ready or willing to feed themselves. Bibs are for those who are more interested in being served than in serving. Bibs are for those who insist that the church exists for them and their needs. Bibs are for babes in the faith, those who haven’t caught God’s vision for the church, or those who are not yet committed to their faith.

On the other hand, aprons are for those who have a heart to serve others in Jesus’ name. Aprons are for those who know that they are the church. Aprons are for those who don’t mind getting their hands dirty. Aprons are for those who take the time daily to feed their spiritual hunger. Aprons are for those who love their church, and are excited about telling others how much they love it and invite them to visit with them.

As a reminder of this call to service, thanks to the initiative of our Pastoral Council President, Bill Mann, we will soon have a banner hanging in the back of Church that says simply “APRONS VS. BIBS”. Every member of this Church, by virtue of your Baptism in Christ Jesus, is called to a ministry of service. No one is too old or too young; too tired or too weak; too busy or too complacent. To paraphrase Mother Theresa, you don’t have to be qualified, you just have to be willing, and then God will qualify you.

It’s time Church! Take off your bibs and put on your aprons. We have work to do. And what is that work? It is to be the greatest praise and worship community in Chester County. It is to be the Church that is of greatest service to our community, especially known for our caring for the poor, the sick, and the elderly. It is to have the best religious education for our children so that they enthusiastically and joyfully embrace their faith in

Jesus Christ. We want to be the fastest growing Catholic Church in Chester and Lancaster Counties because we are the most welcoming Church people have ever encountered.

If we are going to be NUMBER 1; if we are going to be the greatest, Church, TAKE OFF YOUR BIBS AND PUT ON YOUR APRONS. Become DIAKONIA—people who freely, willingly, joyfully, and generously out of a sense of love, not out of obligation, attend to the needs of each other and all who are in need us.