

My friend Father Aloysius returns to Uganda on Monday, so I spent part of the day Thursday with him to show him a little more of life in the Midwest. We visited Mike Mathews, who directs St. James Place, a social service agency in Kansas City. Father Aloysius asked, "What do they do here?" I said, "They help the poor." Then I remembered that Father Aloysius maybe earns one dollar a day at home, and he is moving into a new parish assignment next week, where the rectory has no electricity and no running water. I admitted, "The poor here are probably not as poor as the poor in Uganda." At St. James Place, Mike told us, "We help people, but they have to help themselves. If they ask us to pay a utility bill this month, we first make them figure out how they are going to pay their utility bill next month. If they have no job, we do not find employment for them; we teach them how to look for a job. We also tell them how to dress for a job interview." Mike was wearing a dirty t-shirt as he was explaining all this to us. He said, "Our staff always points to me as a bad example. They say, 'When you go for an interview, don't dress like him.'"

We tend to measure success by the kind of job you have, the clothes you wear, the house you live in, or the car you drive. Jesus measured it differently. His path to success, he told the disciples, was through treachery, crucifixion and resurrection. His success involved giving, not getting. The Twelve missed the point so badly that they started discussing who among them was the greatest. If they were typical young men, they were probably not saying, "Peter, I think you're the greatest;" "No, James, you're the greatest;" "No, I think John is definitely the greatest." Instead, they were probably saying, "I am the greatest;" "No way;" "No, me, I'm the greatest." And so on. For them, the path to success was self-promotion. It didn't really matter who was the greatest; it mattered that each one tried to convince the others that he was the greatest; and it didn't matter if the others were convinced; it just mattered that you could verbally push them around.

Jesus was having none of it. "If anyone wishes to be first, you shall be the last of all and the servant of all." Some people never get this. Serving others just does not fit into their world view. They have to be first; they have to be best; they have to be greatest. They are driven by the desire to possess power, not to share it; to put other people down as a way of putting themselves up. You can quote Jesus all you want, "the last shall be first," and they just won't see it that way. Often, there's not much you can do for them.

What we can do for ourselves is to live the way Jesus expects. Serve the needs of others. Read to a child. Hire the college graduate. Give time to charities. Help your neighbor. Compliment the person who struggles to do better. Listen hard to someone who needs your ear. Let go of the need to be first, and embrace the desire to serve.