

I heard it again at a funeral this week. There's a comment some member of the grieving family is bound to make. It goes something like: "I had no idea how good my friends are." Or, "People have been wonderful." Although death brings sadness, it frequently brings the joy of people who love us.

And it's true: The service we give a suffering friend is quite special. But it's the service Jesus asks us to give everyone.

He explains this in Capernaum, where Peter's family lives. He's been traveling with his disciples from Caesarea Philippi in the north to Jerusalem. Relaxing now, he asks them what they talked about on the trip. They tense up, because they were discussing who was the greatest disciple. Incidentally, this is very male. If you can get men to discuss anything they will quickly discuss competition instead. So Jesus tells them about competition in the reign of God. It's not to be the greatest, but to be the least--not to be served, but to serve. This is very un-male, and I'm sure it's a reason why even today men of many cultures just don't much get into religion.

Then Jesus grabs the nearest example of powerlessness; he sets a child in front of them. A child is weak, a child has no authority or legal status, a child is helpless. To help a child is to perform a good act for an insignificant person with no hope of an earthly reward. Jesus says if we want to be great, we should receive a child like receiving the Messiah; we should serve the poor like serving the rich; we should help the powerless like seeking favors from the powerful. We should serve strangers like serving a suffering friend.

Some of the powerless make headlines. People die from random shootings. Hostages are held unjustly in faraway lands. MIA's have never had their stories told. Persons with AIDS get rejected by their families. These powerless make headlines and their plight deserves our care.

But some of the powerless never make headlines because they are too ordinary. One family member berates another. Children make sport of their classmates. We punish too severely the offenses of our friends, employers, and public servants. We meet the powerless every day, and too often they simply become another opportunity for us to become more powerful.

The powerless are here to be served, not to be walked over. If we wish to be great, we will serve the powerless wherever they are--in the world or in our families. Then we will see the kingdom of God.