

The Olympics will provide many exciting moments for us all this week. Even for the unathletic it's a thrill to watch the greatest do their best. Some years ago when the Royals made it to the World Series, I--like most of us--wanted a chance to see it live, to watch the pros play like pros, but I couldn't get a ticket. Then I learned that a lawyer in the parish had not one but four seats. I caught him that night at church and asked him, "Did you know that if you give a World Series ticket to a Catholic priest you gain a plenary indulgence for the remission of all your sins?" He said, "All of them?" For a lawyer this was quite a deal. I won the ticket, the Royals lost the game, but it was still exciting to be in the presence of greatness.

Now, to be honest, most of us want more than that. We want to be great, we want to be remembered--through our work, through children, in writing, planting, or a building that will last.

It's good to strive for greatness. It enhances our work, and helps us do our best. But the desire for greatness can get a life of its own. It can overpower us. It can make us take advantage of others; it can make us fight others; it can fill us with fear that someone else is after that same greatness we wish to achieve.

On the road to Galilee the Apostles are having a lively discussion about who will be greatest. It's lively because they're not just talking about human greatness, or even Olympic greatness, they're talking about greatness in the kingdom of God. This is major greatness. Jesus picks up on the tone and innocently asks, "So, what are you guys talking about?" The timing could not have been worse. Jesus had just told them he will suffer and die, and what's on their minds is their own glory.

Jesus brings a child to them and says if you want to be great, be like this child. I'm sure they wondered, "What's so great about a child?" Especially if there were parents among them; parents ask this question all the time. What is so great about the child in this story? Not innocence or purity, but service. The child is an example of loving service. I'm sure they thought, "My kid is no example of loving service." But it is. A child is defenseless, a child is dependent, a child will serve out of love, knowing it will receive love in return. That is service.

You see, the quest for greatness--as inspiring as it is--the quest can be poison. It can cause us to hurt others and to live in fear of being hurt. The cure for this poison is service, a life lived seeking the good of all. Just like a child who serves in love.

If Jesus overheard your conversation one day, what would you be discussing on the road? Would he be interested? Would you be embarrassed? Would he need to point to a child to remind us that greatness comes not from athletic ability, not from success, not from wealth, but from service? He will praise us not so much for what we achieve, but when we serve one another in love.