

HOMILY
September 24, 2006

Rev. Andrew A. Czajkowski
St. John the Evangelist Parish
Davison, Michigan

“If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?” the teacher asked her Sunday school class. “No!” the children all answered. “If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven?” Again, the children’s answer was “No!” “Well, then, if I were kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my family, would that get me into heaven?” the teacher asked them again. Again, they all answered, “No!” “Well,” the teacher continued, “then how can I get to heaven?” A five-year-old boy shouted out, “*You gotta be dead!*”

We all knew that answer, didn’t we? *You gotta be dead to get to heaven.*

We have kind of a similar question in today’s gospel that Deacon Dan proclaimed. The Disciples were arguing on the way about who was the greatest. Exactly what they said we really don’t know, but I imagine that the conversation could go something like this:

Simon Peter: “Guys, I’m Jesus’ right hand man. I’m part of the inner circle, I’m the spokesman of the group; therefore, I’m the greatest.” Whereupon Andrew, Peter’s brother, might have spoken up and said, “Well, dear big brother, let me remind you of something which you have conveniently forgotten. I was the one who called you into discipleship first. I was the one who invited you to come to Jesus. I got you here. Therefore, I’m the greatest.”

Then the brothers James and John at this point speak up, “You guys both miss the point. Greatness is measured by the amount you have sacrificed. Here we stood to inherit our father Zebedee’s lucrative fishing business and we gave all that up.”

When the twelve arrived at their destination, Jesus asked them what they were talking about. You will recall that when the Disciples were questioned by Jesus, they were strangely quiet. They were embarrassed. It was at this point that Jesus told them and us what it is that makes for true greatness in the eyes of God. *“If you would be great, be a servant.”*

Friends, greatness is never about self-promotion. Greatness is about service. One man who had an enormous impact on his company was the founder and CEO of Wendy’s fast food restaurants, Dave Thomas. Dave Thomas was a remarkable success story. Adopted as a child, he never finished high school. In his book, The Common Guy’s Guide to Everyday Success, Dave said he got his MBA long before his GED. He says he has a photograph of himself in his MBA graduation outfit—a snazzy, knee-length work apron. At Wendy’s, he says, MBA doesn’t mean Master of Business Administration, it means “Mop Bucket Attitude.” It means a commitment to service. Even though he was CEO, Dave Thomas rolled up his sleeves and did the lowest of the jobs. That’s a commitment to service.

That’s what Jesus wants from his Disciples—a Mop Bucket Attitude. We exist to serve, not to be served. That’s the secret of happiness in any job—to see it as a calling, a vocation, and an opportunity. This is why some people are so unhappy in life. They want to be served rather than to serve. And the ironic thing is that people who are waited on hand and foot are some of the unhappiest people in the world. Greatness is found in service to all.

A group of European theologians once visited Mother Teresa in Calcutta. She said to these great theologians, “You try to do what I am doing, then you will be able to enjoy what I am doing.” She took them to one of her childcare centers and picked up a child who was playing in the mud and gave the child a kiss. She waited for her guests to do the same. None of them did.

Jesus took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, Jesus said to them, “Whoever receives one such child as this in my name receives me. And whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.” A little child. I am so glad that there are people in this church who regard serving children as part of their life purpose.

A little child. Jesus selected a child as a way of saying to the Disciples that they were to serve those who were helpless, those who could not help themselves, regardless of their age. Again, I think of those who take care of their aging parents or elderly family members, or family members with dementia or Alzheimer's. This is how we best serve God—by serving the least and the lowest.

Perhaps we could sum up with a beautiful fable.

Once upon a time, there was a knight. The knight wanted to serve his king and be the most honorable and noble knight who ever lived. At his knighting, he was so overcome by dedication that he made a special oath. He vowed to bow his knees and lift his arms to his king and him alone. The knight was given the task of guarding a city on the frontier of the kingdom. Every day he stood by the gate of the city in full armor.

One day, as he was standing at attention guarding his post, a peasant woman passed by with goods for the market. Her cart turned over spilling potatoes and carrots and onions everywhere. The knight wouldn't help the poor woman. He just stood at attention lest he break his vow by bending his knees to pick up the woman's goods.

Time passed and one day a man with one leg was passing by and his crutch broke. "Good knight, sir, reach down and pick me up." But the knight would no stop or lift a hand to help lest he break his vow.

Years and decades passed and the knight was getting old. One day his grandson came by and said, "Grandpa, pick me up and take me to the Fair." He would not stoop lest he break his vow to the king.

Finally, after many years, the king came to visit and inspect the knight. As the king approached, the knight just stood there at attention. The king inspected him as he stood there. But then he noticed that the knight was crying. "You are one of the noblest knights I have seen. Why do you cry?" asked the king. "Your majesty, I took a vow that I would bow and lift my arms in homage to you, but I am unable to keep my vow. These

years have done their work and the joints of my armor are rusted. I cannot lift my arms or bend my knees.”

With the loving voice of a parent, the king replied, “Perhaps if you had knelt to help all those who passed by and lifted your arms to embrace all those who came to you, you would have been able to keep your vow to pay me homage today.”

This is it. Here is how you become the greatest.

Find a place where you can serve.

It may be in your work. It may be at school. It may be here in our church. But you will not be happy or truly successful until you see that we are here to serve. Not to be served but to serve others, especially the least and the lowest, is the best way to discover greatness and someday be able to enter heaven.