

Sometimes it's pretty helpful to get a reminder that the culture and world view that we experience here in Iowa in the 21st century is radically different from the culture and world view of people living in Jesus' time and place.

Here, our sense of who we are is guided by formative aspects of our history. Our sense of individualism born both out of the war for independence from Britain and the drive to move west and explore new lands—well, lands that were new to those pioneers who came here from other countries anyway. Our passion for democratic expression which values that idea of one person one vote. Our sense of equality and fairness, born out of the Declaration of Independence that proclaims that all people are created equal. Our confidence in the rule of law and the rights of individuals under the law. These values are formative to our understanding of who we are, and they guide how we relate to one another, how we move about in the world, and how we make decisions about our lives.

None of those values would describe a person living in first century Palestine. The pivotal social value in that culture had to do with honor and not just honor, in and of itself, but public recognition of one's honor. People of that time and place, and still to a large extent today, in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries, would measure their families honor over and against the honor status of others.

Because honor status was based, in part, on limited economic assets—land, crops, livestock, political clout, and the like, honor gained by one family would mean honor lost by another family. Communities would assess and through social networks control how much honor each family had, gauge where it came from and determine how well a family managed it, enhanced it, or how badly they lost it.

Honor was established by the family one was born into, but honor could also be earned in a variety of ways, but only those recognized and approved by the community.

Honor status determined how people dressed, their mannerisms, their gestures. It guided posture, who could eat with who, where one's place would be at the banquet table, who could start a conversation, who would be accorded an audience. It drove potential work and vocation, and who one could marry.

Honor was hard to gain, and all too easy to lose.

Jesus' disciples are arguing among themselves about which one was the greatest. A squabble of this nature would have been common practice in first-century Palestine. They were taking a measure of one another's honor status, gauging whether and how their association with Jesus had moved them up the scale, maybe comparing each other's family status before and after being called out of home and vocation to follow this Jewish rabbi, this possible messiah, this maybe-one-day powerful king. They would have been challenging one another using well-practiced verbal attacks—which was one socially accepted way of gaining honor.

But the striking thing about this argument that they are having is the context. Jesus has *just* told them, for the second time now, that he will be betrayed into human hands, that those human hands will kill him and that three days after being killed, he will rise again.

Mark tells us that they didn't understand what Jesus was saying and were afraid to ask. The meaning behind the word Mark uses indicates that they don't have the capacity or ability to understand. There are several quite plausible reasons for their lack of understanding—and the ways they don't understand God's work are not too different from the ways we all too often don't understand God's work.

Last week Grace talked about just how hard it would have been for Peter and the disciples to understand what Jesus is describing. The way he's talking about what it means to be

messiah has no connection to what they've expected and hoped for. The notion that the one who came to save them would die at the very hands of their persecutors, well, that's just inconceivable. Of course they don't understand.

Or it could be the age-old reason that keeps them from understanding what Jesus is saying, sin. The sin of pride, the sin of greed, the sin of selfishness. Their preconceived opinions about Jesus and what he will do for them keep them from seeing what he is actually doing and saying. John Calvin called it the "veil of foolish imagination." They hear what they want to hear and see what they want to see.

It could also be that they're just afraid. Afraid that the future Jesus sketches out for himself will somehow attach to each of them, like a bad virus. Afraid that a threat to Jesus inevitably means a threat to them, to their families, to their honor status, to their very lives.

So they don't understand. They can't understand. They are afraid to even try to understand. Instead they get into a debate over their status among one another. Who is greatest? How will any of this help each one of them individually advance the cause of themselves and their families? Meanwhile, in a way that is just as true for each of us, they give little thought to what has been given them. As they debate about the advantages of being a follower of Jesus, the Messiah, this would-be-king, as they prepare to ride his tailcoat to higher social status, they forget that they are only where they are because he has called them. Because he invited them into this business, because he called them away from their work-a-day lives to be his disciples. They forget that they are only where they are because of what God is doing in Jesus. They forget that everything they have has come from God, any advantage they have gained is a result of God's blessings in their lives.

Even though we live in a culture that values the individual, that proclaims equality, that imagines that each person gets a fair shake, we know that often that's not the real picture. We

know that sometimes our values are more aspirational than the practical realities of lived experience. We do the same measuring, status seeking, and communal testing of status claims as any middle Eastern cultures.

Ask anyone who has ever been a junior high or high school student. Ask anyone who's ever been frustrated when a work colleague gets a promotion we feel they don't deserve, or that we should have had. Ask anyone who finds at some point in life that they are not automatically advancing in salary, size of home, material possessions, retirement pension, number of friends, busyness of schedule.

Maybe we don't do it to the same degree as those of other cultures, but the fact that we do that status seeking and measuring of one another under the guise of claims of equality and fair play can make the negative aspects of such measuring even more insidious and problematic. It can make bearing the brunt of the unfairness of our systems remarkably hard and painful.

And just like the disciples, we do such measuring and status seeking with a blind eye to what we have been given.

First the privilege we have been given by virtue of our birth. Privilege that comes automatically from our race, our gender, our socio-economic status, our place of birth. It is our impulse in this country to say that we have what we have because we earned it. Like our forebears, we struck out into unknown territory and gained all the good that we have—entirely on our own, at no one else's expense.

And secondly, to all the blessings that we have been granted by God. God created us. God brought us into this world. And God created a world where there are enough abundant blessings for all.

The disciples must realize that their argument about who is the greatest wouldn't sit well with Jesus. At some level, they must understand something of what he is about, because their

silence speaks to a sense of shame at their narrow and selfish understanding of what God is doing.

Jesus wants to refocus their thinking. He tells them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he provides a helpful object lesson, taking a child into his lap and telling them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.”

Children in Jesus’ day were among the weakest and most vulnerable. Infant mortality rates were as high as 30% Another 30% of live births died by age six and 60% died by age 16. Children were the first to suffer in times of famine, war, disease or dislocation. While a minor, a child’s social status was on par with a slave or servant. In fact, one word for servant also means child.

Jesus is calling his disciples, and us, to think about our lives in a new way. Jesus is calling us to stop thinking about ourselves—what we need and what we deserve, and to turn our attention to the most vulnerable, the most dependent, the most in need. Jesus is calling us to stop measuring ourselves against others and to start seeing the needs of those who have no means to do measuring.

As Jesus himself has done every step of his ministry. Jesus reaches out to, welcomes, heals and eats with gentiles, the unclean, the sick, lepers, tax collectors and other notorious sinners, the poor, women, demoniacs, and now children. Jesus challenges the wealthy, the powerful and the religious elite. Jesus challenges those who might benefit his own honor status, and Jesus joins with those who can do nothing but damage his social status.

And that is the life of discipleship to which Jesus calls each of us.

[picture of Amanda]

This is a picture of my niece Amanda. She is pursuing on a degree in nursing at Ohio State University, and in the meantime is working as a patient care associate at Ohio State University's medical center. Some of the nurses in our congregation may already have an idea about this, but she is dressed this way because she is about to care for a homeless person, struggling with addiction and mental illness, who has been brought to the hospital for the treatment of an open wound. Amanda was preparing to help clean him up and treat him for severe lice and maggots. I told her she looks like a superhero in this picture. But in fact, she's not a superhero. She's a nurse in training, ready to do her job, ready to live out her vocation, ready to live as one who is called to serve others.

We don't have to do the work that Amanda is doing to be a servant to our neighbors. We just need to be ready to serve those who are in need. Those who are vulnerable. Those who are weak. Those whom our culture overlooks, disregards, ignores. Jesus calls us to stop worrying about ourselves, our status, our position, our next promotion, and see those, often right in front of us, who we are called to serve.

It could be as small as a smile for a harried and stressed checker at the grocery store. It could be as much as a vocational call that doesn't offer the best wage, or the most important social position. It could be a card mailed to someone who is a shut-in. It could be taking a week of vacation for a mission trip, or a morning of precious free time to help build a Habitat house. It could be holding in prayer those around us who need care, and then asking God to guide us as we seek to be the one who provides that care.

See, the thing about last place, is that's where the people are that Jesus particularly cares about. It's where we're called to stand with the ones who are really, "...all the best people."