

We, as a people, are infatuated with where we sit. Just ask anyone that has showed up for Mass only to find someone else sitting in “their” pew. We want to sit where we want to sit. You can now reserve the exact seats you want at the movie theater. We’ll even pay more money to get better seats to concerts and sporting events. Right here at home, some of the biggest fundraisers at Boo Bash and the annual Spaghetti Dinner are the auction items for reserved seating at various school and church functions.

And we get anxious when our seating is uncertain. If you’ve ever flown Southwest Airlines, you know exactly what I’m talking about. It’s basically a free-for-all for seating. You maneuver to get on the plane as soon as possible to get a good seat before someone else takes it and you’re forced to sit in one of those dreaded middle seats. I think Hell might just be a plane full of nothing but middle seats.

And we associate importance with seating. A formal wedding reception is a prime example. A lot of planning goes into where each guest sits. So-and-so has to sit in a specific place or she’ll get her feelings hurt. It’s like a giant chess match. Then, the guests show up and quickly realize their relevance by how close they’re seated to the bride and groom.

Even Jesus’ apostles weren’t immune to this seating phenomenon. In today’s Gospel, we hear about how James and John were jockeying for reserved seats in Heaven. They wanted to sit one on Jesus’ right and one on His left. In the culture of the time, these seats signified prominence and prestige. James and John desired positions of utmost honor and esteem.

But this was a strange request coming from the brothers for two reasons. The first is that it comes on the heels of Jesus predicting His own death for a third time. The verses right before our Gospel selection, that we don’t hear, picture Jesus talking about how He will be condemned

to death, handed over to the Gentiles, mocked and spit on, flogged and killed, and then rise on the third day.

James and John respond to this ominous prediction oddly enough by asking Jesus for a favor. They say to Jesus, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” They’re like children asking their parent to say “yes” before they reveal what they’re asking for. Their request is akin to the prodigal son’s request for his inheritance before his father had passed away. They want a blank check from Jesus.

The second reason this was a strange request is because James and John were obviously already in Jesus’ inner circle. Whenever anything happens of importance, it’s always Peter, James, and John mentioned to be in attendance. Yet, here they are trying to squeeze Peter out of the equation. There’s three of them in the inner circle and, in their minds, only seats for two.

The Gospel says that the other ten apostles became indignant at James and John when they learned of their request. A popular theory is that they became indignant not because of the content of their request but because James and John had thought of it first. They had beaten the rest of them to the punch. At this point in their journey with Jesus, they all wanted prominence and prestige.

This desire for prominence and prestige is inherent in us also. Deep down, we like to be recognized and honored. This validation makes us feel good. It makes us feel important. But Jesus told them, and us here today, that we’ve gotten our priorities out of whack. We shouldn’t be concerned with how much notoriety and esteem we can amass. God doesn’t care about titles and awards. God doesn’t care about how many followers we have on social media. God doesn’t care if we’re featured in newspapers or magazines.

God cares if we love one another. God cares if we're willing to serve others. God cares if we attempt to imitate Jesus. Jesus has shown us the way and is the perfect model for us to follow. He could have chosen to come as a mighty ruler, but he didn't. He chose to come as a servant – as one of us. As our second reading tells us, “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.” He was tested just like we're tested. Our true glory comes from the degree to which we give ourselves to others, just like Our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord suffered on the cross in order to show us that there is no limit to His love, that He is trustworthy, and that if we follow him faithfully, He will never let us down.

We're all called to be modern-day Suffering Servants. Jesus' expectations of us are pretty clear. He expects us to give up control; which is even harder than giving up money or personal possessions. He expects us to “let go and let God.” Jesus desires for us to give up our will to God and trust in His plan for our life. If you want to find a key to true happiness, take a look at service. Service is turning our talents inside out – putting our God-given gifts at the disposal of others. Service is sacrifice – extending ourselves, stretching out a helping hand towards others in need.

The sacrificial nature of the call to serve is different for each of us. And it's up to us to discern what it is. It may come in the form of holding our tongue to prevent undue criticism of another person. It may come in the form of placing the honor and opinion of another above our own. It may come in the form of bearing another's burdens in a way that doesn't make the other person feel like a burden. It may come in the form of foregoing some free time to visit a homebound parishioner. It may even come in the form of answering the call to be a priest, deacon, or religious brother or sister.

James and John requested of Jesus the gift of honor and status. Jesus asked of them, and now of us, that we accept the gift of true servanthood that equips us with all we need to be successful. We're called to be partners with Christ in service to each other.

Once, a journalist saw Saint Teresa of Calcutta picking up the dying from the streets and caring for them. He told her, "Not even for a million dollars would I do a job like that." Mother Teresa answered, "Neither would I." Nor would she do it for all the treasures of the world. But she would gladly do it in obedience to what her Master taught her, "Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all." As the world now knows, her greatness lied in caring for the most unloved, unwanted, and uncared for - regardless of race, gender, and creed.

Brothers and sisters, true greatness involves the service of others. In the end, our focus shouldn't be on marching through the front gates of Heaven and WHERE our reserved seats are. Our focus should be on IF we can sneak in through the servant's entrance.