

*“The greatest among you must be the servant.”*

Such a strong theme of Jesus’ teaching. Such a hard thing to practice. This concept of the greatest being the servant really comes through the Torah commands that guided Jewish life. In fact, Israel wasn’t even supposed to have a king; wasn’t supposed to have one person that was exalted. No, God was to be their King, *but* if they did have a king, the king was to see himself as no greater than any other Israelite. That is in the torah commands. Pretty radical stuff!

No wonder Jesus tells his disciples to listen to the teachings of the Torah, as taught by the scribes and Pharisees, but do not *follow* their example. For they did things to be seen. Loved seats of honor. Dressed in a way that showed off their “holiness.”

*Thus they preach, but do not practice.*

I mean, I can’t entirely blame them. For this teaching, to act as a servant, it is tough. And so few of us know how to practice it. Or to trust this way of life. And even if you think you are doing it, another way of living easily slips in.

Take Lent for example. It is easy to take on more than we can bite, or give up something to make it very rigorous rather than seeing it as a time to make our lives more simple so that we might be of greater service to others.

And even though I have heard this teaching countless times: to not seek out honor, to not strive for recognition, so many of my life goals, patterns and habits have been shaped to the contrary. Even though I have lived my whole life as a follower of Jesus, hearing this teaching year after year, it is so easy to listen to the voices that pull me in the opposite direction.

I can remember distinctively being a high school student, thinking: if I don’t receive recognition or honor for my accomplishments, then who am I? In fact, I was told over and over and over: colleges *love* extracurriculars.

So I worked really hard to do as many as I could: cross country, soccer, track, I played a musical instrument. Sometimes running cross country then going to my soccer practice. Not to mention I went to school all day and would have homework that night. I went to a church youth group and did community service. On weekends, I would have sports. Oh, and, I took a zero period, starting before 7am just to make sure I could get enough classes in. And I mean I took as many advanced placement classes as I could... I couldn't get behind. I applied to prestigious clubs. I ran for student government. I thought: I *have* to do all of this. I *have* to be seen. And, I was. I won awards. I received recognition. Did I do this for show? In part. I mean, yeah, I wanted to prove to my peers that I was just as good as them. Prove to myself I was good enough. To prove to a university: you want me! I clung to my resume. To my ideas of who I was.

And if it was Lent in high school, I would give up the hardest thing I could think of: No sugar...just to prove to myself I could do it. If a Pharisee had tied up a heavy burden for me, and said carry it. I would have replied: "Easy. For how far?"

After all these 4 years I went to college.

But when I got there, I didn't have the same notoriety I had in high school. I didn't know how to play the same achievement. And I had this haunting feeling: *did my life mean anything?*

Sure, I had deep friendships, perhaps more robust and meaningful than I had ever formed in my life. I made friends with people who were deeply curious about how to live. I had late night conversations processing with them their parents' divorce, or the death of their brother. Talking through the excitement and heartbreak of college relationships. I had learned to open my mind wide, to see the world in new perspectives and challenge my once held beliefs about how I thought the world worked.

But when I graduated college, I graduated with no accolades. No high honors. No awards. Just another student in the crowd of thousands. I

had good friends, but I did not have “prestige” that I once had. I felt like a failure.

Around the same time that I was finishing college, my little sister graduated from high school and I remember putting together this book for her where people had written her letters. And I remember reading the one my dad wrote. And my dad is not a verbose person. In fact he is a man of few words when he writes. And this is what he wrote in her letter:

*Some parents are proud of their kid for their accolades and honors. For their accomplishments and awards. I am proud of you for the person you are. I see the way you treat your friends and other people, you really care for others. You really love people well. People take notice. And that makes me so proud.*

This totally rocked me. In chasing after the need for prestige, had I missed the depth of my relationships as a measure of my life? Had I missed what life is truly measured by? The gospel message came through to me in my sister — someone who didn’t receive all these recognitions in high school — didn’t play the game of proving herself by picking up heavy burdens, carrying them to prove something about herself. Didn’t do things to be seen. Rather, she chose to love well. And when we love well, we choose to be a servant to all.

People saw her actions, noticed, and were changed by it. And not changed in the way where they rushed to pick up a heavier load of extracurriculars, but were freed by the type of person she was.

This was a conversion moment for me. It was an invitation to let go of this desire for greatness and rather try to begin to see myself as an equal to all.

For I really think the gospel comes through to us not in people who are exalted, but through people who live normal, seemingly unglamorous lives but do the hard work of loving and serving. Like my friend who is a dad who humbly changes another diaper or wakes up in the middle of the night to hold his two year old son after a nightmare and tells him

it will be okay. Or my husband who years back spent his birthday in the hospital with his little brother while he underwent brain surgery. Or a student of mine, who might not ever be top of her class but stays up late to make a birthday card by hand for her friend to celebrate her the next day. Or teachers I have met who have been showing up for teenagers day after day for thirty years still excited to teach their subject. Normal, unglamorous. This invitation to live the gospel is open to all: the only criteria is humility and servanthood. Humility says we don't have to have all the answers. Humility says we can rely on our neighbors for help. We don't have to shoulder the burden alone. And we can stop striving for high places of honor that will never satisfy us anyway.

So after college, after I began to have some pretty deep revelations about how I was ordering my life, I met the Jesuits and fell in love with Ignatian spirituality. Allow me to end with a prayer from Ignatius that has helped me on this road of recovery, away from striving for greatness and towards the path of humility. Away from needing specific titles, clinging to my resume or my ideas about myself and towards the desire to actually try to love and serve more totally. What I love about this prayer is that every time I say it, a deep wave of relief comes over me. The burdens, I feel like I put them down, I hope it does the same for you:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,  
my memory, my understanding,  
and my entire will,  
All I have and call my own.  
You have given all to me.  
To you, Lord, I return it.  
Everything is yours; do with it what you will.  
Give me only your love and your grace,  
that is enough for me. Amen.