

Perhaps you can remember playing the game “King of the Hill” when you were a child. One person runs to the top of a small hill and issues the challenge, “I am king of the hill.” Others then attempt to push that person off the hill so they can claim to be “king of the hill.” If the competition becomes too fierce someone can get hurt.

It just isn't the little children that play the game “King of the Hill.” See the junior high girl rise in popularity and watch as others try to tear her down. See hard workers moving up at work and watch as others try to tear them down. Even in the church there can be those who are jealous of others who take a more active role. It is part of our sinful nature to want to be at the top of the pile not at the bottom even if it means stepping on other people to get there.

Jesus' beloved disciples were playing that game. I don't know who started it. Somehow they started arguing about who was the greatest when it came to following Jesus. I can easily imagine what they must have said. Peter, James and John must have said, “Jesus takes us everywhere with him and he leaves the nine of you behind. We must be most important.” Then Judas says, “He put me in charge of the money bag. I must be most important.” Then Andrew says, “Wait a minute— I was one of the first disciples he called.” Then Jesus says, “What were you arguing about on the road?” He knew very well what they were arguing about. He knew it was a stupid argument, and deep down, the disciples knew it was pretty stupid, too. So they hung their heads and kept quiet.

It is easy to see how bad the disciples were but it is not as easy to see how we can develop this thinking that we should have special treatment from Jesus for all that we have done for him. Who of us would ever say, “I want to be first in Jesus' kingdom?” Yet, at the same time we easily fall into thinking, “Lord, please don't let me be last.” So, this morning we ask the question “Who Is First in Jesus' Kingdom?”

When it comes to serving you, Jesus made you his #1 priority. I am convinced if I were the only person in the whole world who had sinned and everyone else was still perfect, Jesus would have come to this earth just to save a person like me. That is the kind of Savior you have.

What did Jesus do to make you number one? He willingly gave up his life for us. That's the point Jesus wanted to drive home to his beloved disciples. They wanted Jesus to build a great kingdom here on this earth similar to what Pope Francis described in his recent visit to this country. They did not want to hear about Jesus giving his life on the cross. That is why Jesus took them aside again by themselves, away from the crowds of people. “He said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.’”

Notice Jesus predicts that he would be betrayed into the hands of men. Judas would hand him over to the people who came to capture him in the Garden. Then these people handed Jesus over to the leaders of the Jewish people. They handed Jesus over to Pontius Pilate. Pontius Pilate handed Jesus over to King Herod. Herod then handed Jesus back over to Pontius Pilate. Pontius handed Jesus over to his soldiers so they could nail him to the cross. This same word is used in Romans 4 to describe how Jesus was handed over for our sins, “He was delivered over for our sins and raised to life for our justification.” I can take that verse and apply it to my life personally. Jesus was handed over for my sin and raised to life to declare me justified or not guilty.

Look at Jesus and ask yourself the important question, “Who is first in the kingdom of

God.” Jesus put you first. He put you ahead of himself. Philippians 2 says of Jesus, “Who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.....he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on the cross.” In John 17 Jesus prays for his beloved disciples that they might have the highest honor and privilege that could every be given to anyone. “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory.” Jesus wants us to see his glory and share in his glory. He wants us to be one with him and the Father. Could any greater honor ever be bestowed on people?

As you listen to Jesus tell his disciples what was going to happen to him, you realize how desperately you need to have Jesus to be close to God, loved by him and number one in his eyes. This is so personal. I have nothing to offer God that can move him to love me or accept me as his dear child in this life and for all eternity. Psalm 130 asks the all important question, “If you Lord kept a record of sins, O Lord who could stand?” The Lord your God knows your heart and mine. There is nothing that can possibly found in us to make us worthy of his love. But everything needed to be number one in the eyes of the Lord is provided freely for us in Christ. Jesus was talking about you when he spoke about being killed and rising from the dead.

In one of the psalms we sing a refrain that goes, “Keep me, keep me as the apple of your eye.” The apple of the eye is the pupil. The Hebrew word is actually “little person.” If you get very close to someone and if you have good eyesight you can see yourself in the person’s eye. So when we pray and ask the Lord to keep us as the apple of his eye, we are asking him to keep us very close to him. You are number one in the eyes of the Lord your God through Jesus. Over and over we confess and sing about God’s mercy, his unfailing love and loyalty that follows us every day of our life.

Because Jesus put you first nothing separates you from his love. You are now in a position to put yourself last when it comes to serving other people. That is the point Jesus made to his disciples.

Notice first how Jesus deals with their sin of selfishness. “They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’” Jesus knew they were arguing about who was the greatest. The disciples were silent. They knew how sinful and foolish they were. They were ashamed just as they were that night in the upper room where Jesus washed their feet. None of them wanted to take on the role of the servant who washed the feet and dried them with a towel. How ashamed they must have been that night when Jesus bent down and washed their feet and showed them the full extent of his love for them.

Here is a story that demonstrates how Jesus helps us overcome our selfishness. A twelve year old girl did not want her mother to help out in the lunch line at the junior high school. You see her mother was badly scared in her face. The other children would look strangely at her. She never told her daughter exactly why she was so badly burned in the apartment fire that happened when the girl was a little baby. Finally, she thought, it is time to tell her what really happened. She told the whole story of how they woke up to a fire in the apartment where they were living. Because of the fast moving fire, the mother had to rescue her daughter from her bed room. She wrapped her baby in her arms and covered her with a blanket. But in the process she was badly burned on her face. The daughter started to cry.

She realized how selfish and self-centered she had been. Now she was proud of her mother and didn't care what the rest of the kids were saying about her.

So we are proud of the scars we see on the hands of Jesus. Someday we will see these nail prints when Jesus raises us to life again. Now as we see these nail prints in his hands we think of how he gave his life for us. The nail prints remind us we have peace with God. They remind us that nothing will separate us from Jesus. They also give us the much needed strength to serve people and put them first even it means putting ourselves last.

“Sitting down Jesus called The Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’” What do crabs do when they are thrown into a bucket? If one tries to crawl out of the bucket another crab will instinctively try to pull that one down or even crawl on top of it to get higher up in the bucket. My sinful human heart tells me that in order to survive I need to pull someone down and push myself up. My sinful heart tells me not to help someone else get ahead, because there might not be any opportunity for me. Jesus even spoke about losing our life in order to gain it.

Three years ago there was terrible tragedy that took place in Saudi Arabia. Over 700 people were trampled to death. Apparently two large groups of Muslim pilgrims met and panicked. People began piling up and then they started stepping on people just to get to the top of the pile to keep from suffocating. The instinct to survive and not die from suffocation led them to step on others to get to the top of the pile.

It is happening all the time. People step on others to promote themselves and get ahead. Some years ago there was very popular book put out by Dale Carnegie with the title, “How to Win Friends and Influence People.” Why was that so popular? Because it gave practical advice on how to use people to get ahead and promote yourself. How different is the Christian faith where we serve Jesus by putting us in a position to serve others even if that means coming in last. Jesus took a little child and put in front of the disciples. He told them, “Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.” How different it is to serve Jesus and serve in his kingdom. Rather than picking out the best opportunities to get ahead and to bring glory to ourselves we take the opportunities to serve that certainly aren't going to get us ahead such as welcoming little children and making them important. A small child may be taken care of by a Mr. Mom, or a stay at home mom. A very lowly position in today's economic world. A sacrifice that the child may not realize or appreciate. Yet, even helping a child in Jesus' name spiritually, physically or emotionally is great in the kingdom of God.

Jesus is certainly King of the hill. He is King of kings and Lord of lords, yet he humbled himself and came to this earth to serve people like us who certainly don't deserve his love. So we serve by giving honor and glory to Jesus and giving honor and glory to other members of the body of Christ. Who is first in Jesus kingdom? You are. That allows you to be last in line in your eagerness to serve him and others. Amen.