

TRY CLIMBING DOWN THE LADDER

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. ³⁵ 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." ³⁶ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

My guess is that the child Jesus embraced was not the well scrubbed little suburbanite pictured in our children's Bibles, but rather more like the Third World street urchins we view in the advertisements for outreach ministries like Save the Children and the Christian Children's Fund. At the time of Jesus, childhood was more like a bad cold that needed to be "gotten over," than the royal pampering with which most of us are familiar. While we might occasionally wax nostalgic for the relative freedom of our childhood, the disciples would more likely have been content to leave that all behind.

To the Twelve, a child represented the characteristics of dependence on others, trust to get them through the day, lack of knowledge of how things work, powerlessness in the face of the world, a thirst for relationships and a relative social uselessness. Yet, at the same time, children were important to the posterity of the community. In short, you couldn't do without them, but until they grow up, you probably should just ignore them.

To these expectations Jesus counters, when you welcome such a child you are welcoming God. If a disciple's goal is to be like the Master, then you too must aspire to be like such a child. The things of this world are like a ladder. As we climb higher and higher our perspective becomes altered. Indeed, there is a sticker on the top two rungs that tells us not to climb any further. Yet, when we reach those rungs, our immediate objective always seems to be just beyond our reach, so we climb up just long enough to grab the fruit. When we do, we lose our balance. Jesus says that ladder climbing is the way of the world. The way of the kingdom is to render yourself completely dependent on God. When the fruit is ripe, all you have to do is stand beneath the tree.

Jesus, like the Twelve, I have a burning desire to be important, or at least to be taken seriously by those around me. Even in the church I seek status and visibility. I want to do great things for the Kingdom, but I often find my underlying motive is more about me than the Kingdom. Help me to cultivate an attitude of humility. Help me to know that I can do nothing for the Kingdom without you, and to channel my kingdom aspirations into following where you lead. Amen.