Sunday, September 14, 1980
WHO IS THE GREATEST?
Matthew 18:1-5

It was a question that was on the disciple's mind a lot. "Who is the greatest?" Or in Nebraska football language, "Who is number one?" But for the disciples, it wasn't which football team, "the Jerusalem Olive Pickers," or "the Jericho Sycamores?" Their question had to do with human worth or value. They wanted to know from Jesus which among them was to be regarded as number one or the greatest.

Beneath this question was a deeper one; they were asking as individuals, "Am I a significant person?" "Do I have worth?" Like us, the disciples had observed that in society at large, certain people are considered valuable, and others are not as valuable. Like us, the disciples had felt like losers at times — so they wondered as we wonder — "Am I a significant person?" "Do I count for anything?" "Who is the greatest?" How does one become the greatest?

I recently heard a psychologist say, "The vast majority of young people between twelve and twenty that I have observed are bitterly disappointed with who they are and what they represent. In a world that worships superstars and miracle men and women, they look in the mirror for signs of greatness, seeing only a terminal case of acne."

But teenagers are not alone in this personal devaluation. Every age poses its own unique threats to self-esteem. Little children typically suffer a severe loss of status during the tender years of childhood. Likewise, most adults are still attempting to cope with the inferiority experienced in earlier times. Sometimes too as adults, we lose our self-esteem if we lose our job because we get a lot of our significance from our work.

Senility and mental deterioration in the later years of life often result from the growing awareness by the aged that they live in the exclusive world; where wrinkles, backaches, and dentures are matters of scorn.

Why is it that so many people lack the feeling of self-worth? Why did the disciples worry about whether or not they were the greatest? How come many children have difficulty accepting themselves as they are?

Much of our self-doubt, much of our worry about whether or not we are significant, results from a false system of evaluating human worth. It was the same in the case of the disciples of Jesus. They and we live in a society where not everyone is seen as worthy. Not everyone is accepted. Instead, we reserve our praise and admiration for a select few who seem to have been blessed from birth with the characteristics which society values most highly.

What then are some of the ways our society and culture give value to some people and devalue others?

1. First of all, one of the most highly valued attributes in our culture is physical attractiveness, beauty. Thus, we talk about the beautiful people, "and we have all kinds of beauty contests, even for babies.

A few years ago, Johnny Carson illustrated this high value we place on beauty by describing the delicate situation which occurs when a new other first shows you her baby. What do you

say, as she holds him or her up with the greatest of pride? Carson concluded that the only safe remark is: “My, that sure is a baby, isn’t it.” The onlooker had better choose the words carefully because in our society a beautiful baby is a much more valuable human being than an unattractive one.

Furthermore, studies show that we adults respond very differently to an unusually beautiful child than we do to a particularly unattractive one, and that difference in response can have a profound impact on a developing personality.

In so many subtle ways and some not so subtle, we evaluate human worth in terms of beauty. A number of years ago a tragic incident occurred in Chicago, when eight student nurses were viciously murdered. The following day, a commentator was discussing the violent event on the radio, and he said, “The thing that makes this tragedy much worse is that all eight of these girls were so attractive.” He was implying that these young women were more valuable because they were beautiful, making their loss more tragic. If one accepts that statement, then the opposite is also true; the murders would have been less tragic if homely girls were involved.

Fortunately, Jesus Christ does not evaluate human worth or greatness in terms of physical attractiveness or beauty.

2. A second way our society and culture give value to some people and devalue others is in terms of intelligence.

Shortly after examining their baby’s eyes, ears, nose and related appendages for imperfections, most new parents begin looking for signs of a budding genius. And believe it or not, they often seem to find it. A child’s growth and development are so rapid during the first year of life that his or her awestruck parents watch their brilliant creation in amazement.

Only eight months ago, the child was completely helpless, now look at her! She said mama a full six weeks before the average child. She smiled at five days of age, when in reality the child was grimacing from a severe gas pain.

According to Martha Lear, who wrote a book ca11ed “The Child Worshippers,” the younger generation is our most reliable status symbol. Middle-class parents vigorously compete with each other in raising the best-dressed, best-fed, best-educated, best-mannered, best medicated, most athletic, best-cultured and best-adjusted child on the block. In this atmosphere, the parent who produces and intellectually gifted child is clearly holding the winning sweepstakes ticket.

I’m not downplaying beauty or intelligence. But with our emphasis on evaluating human beings according to these standards, we forget that all people are valuable and that all people need to be loved and accepted, all people have worth as human beings. Love is not something we earn or deserve by being beautiful or intelligent.

3. A third way our society gives value or significance or greatness to human beings is by how much wealth one possesses. People even come to believe — “I am significant, I am the greatest because I own all these things. Furthermore, I have them because I deserve them.”

At one point in his ministry, Jesus told a story to illustrate how foolish this kind of thinking is. It’s called the parable of the rich fool. This man, said Jesus, thought of his own worth and significance in terms of what he owned. But Jesus called him a fool. He said, “One day you will

die like everyone else and then whose will these things be? You can take them with you. When you stand before God, then your human worth will not be judged according to your beauty, your intelligence, or what you possessed in material wealth."

Who then is the greatest? How does God look at our value and significance and how should we value each other?

When the disciples asked Jesus this question, he first of all called a little child to him and then placing him in their midst, he said, "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this little child, that person is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven."

In the Gospel of Mark, in answer to the same question from the disciples, Jesus added, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child, shall not enter it." And Jesus also added, "Whoever would be great among you must be the servant of all; for whoever exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Let's break this answer down into several parts and see how it applies to us and the question as to who is the greatest?

1. First of all, Jesus said, "Unless you become like children, you cannot be considered great." What is there about a child's outlook that we adults so desperately need? To be childlike is to be both humble and open. Some people believe they know it all and have it all — they are convinced that because of their vast knowledge, they are the greatest. Maybe! The know-it-all person believes that he or she doesn't need anyone, not even God.

A child, on the other hand, knows the meaning of dependence and trust. The child looks to the parent for all that he or she receives. There is a trust that what is needed will be provided. Life is a gift, not a possession. The world is a gift.

It's the attitude of a child toward life, toward others that Jesus was talking about. Greatness lies in that.

Children have an openness to new ideas and to people. So, when Jesus calls us to be like children so that we can be great and enter God's kingdom, he is asking us to be humble and open.

A child also has a sense of mystery and awe and wonder that we all need. And children are candid, somet1mes too candid. In the story of the emperor's new clothes, the adults admire them, fulfilling the conventions, until a child said, "But he has nothing on."

2. Secondly, Jesus said in his answer to the disciple's question that those who are the greatest in God's eyes are those who treat the children of society with love and tenderness. It has been said that the final test of a society is what it does to its children. We all know what a serious problem child abuse is in our society.

But Jesus meant even more than that. By children, he also meant a11 those persons among us who are small, weak, ill, handicapped, vulnerable in any way. The greatest among us are those who watch out, take care of and defend the children among us — not only those in our own immediate families but the children among us and remember this includes all who are weak and vulnerable in any way.

3. The third part of Jesus' answer to the question, "Who is the greatest, or am I a significant person," is this: "Whoever would be great among you, let that person become the servant of all."

True greatness according to God comes through our service to other people. That's the ultimate test of greatness. That's what God cares most about — how we treat other people. God does not judge us according to our physical attractiveness, or our intelligence, or our athletic ability, or our family background, or our wealth or lack of it, or our nationality or ethnic origin, or the color of our skin, or hair or lack of hair, or how famous we are for whatever reason. "Whoever would be great among you, let that person become the servant of all. Unless you turn and become like a child, you cannot be considered great in the kingdom of heaven."

Overall, of course, every human being is significant in God's eyes. Our ultimate worth comes from God who made each one of us in God's image.

What greater feeling of work can I have than that God has created me, accepts me, and loves me? God understands my fears and anxieties. God reaches out to me in immeasurable love when no one else may care. If God is for us, who can be against us?

Who is the greatest? There really is no one who is the greatest. Each one of us is the greatest. God loves us all equally. Whenever however we become like children, we are open and expectant, when we treat the children in our society with tenderness, when we become servants to others, then we are living up to the greatness that God has given each one of us — then we fulfill the love that God has for us. Amen.