

## **GOSPEL MESSAGE**

**September 22, 2024**

**LECTIONARY 25**

**Last-place Finish**

Top-ten lists, sports rankings, grade point averages: it is human nature to want to measure ourselves against others. People love competition. At its best, it can motivate us to reach new heights. However, it can also bring out our worst instincts.

Jesus understood this when he caught his disciples debating their own standing. By placing a child in their midst, he overturned their expectations. In Jesus' time, children were very low in the social order. His act was meant as a shocking reminder that in the kingdom of God, to be the greatest means to take last place behind the forgotten, the outcast, and people the world rejects.

Who are such people in our world today? How might we reach out to them and invite them into the center of our own circle? This can sometimes be difficult or unpleasant because it means putting ourselves in the background and forces us to confront difficult truths about our world and our own hearts.

Of course, in the grand scheme of things, none of us is worthy to be in the middle of the circle. We are all flawed and broken. But Jesus welcomes us anyway. He takes all of us into his arms and declares us worthy. We do not need to measure up to receive God's love. Because of this, we are set free to love and serve others, especially the marginalized and the vulnerable, humbly putting others first and seeking to meet their needs.

Whenever we gather for worship, it is a sign that God's love is not a competition. We are all bathed in the waters of baptism. We all gather in a place of honor to be fed at God's table. Returning again and again to God's promises, we find our place at the center, with and among all God's beloved children.

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