

Reaching the end of a job interview, the Human Resources Officer asks the young engineer, a recent grad of MIT, "what starting salary are you looking for?" The engineer replies, "In the region of \$125,000 a year, depending on the benefits package." The interviewer inquires, "Well, what would you say to a package of five weeks' vacation, 14 paid holidays, full Medical benefits with company matching retirement fund to 50% of salary, and a company car leased every two years, say, a red Corvette?" The engineer sits up straight and says, "Wow! Are you kidding?" The interviewer replies, "Yeah, but you started it."

It is interesting isn't it, how we measure success? How we measure security? How we measure what it means to be a leader in our field?

Today we hear Jesus again trying to explain to his disciples that the Son of Humanity is going to be betrayed, killed, and will rise again in three days. Still confused the disciples set off with Jesus toward Capernaum. But Jesus finds out that along the way, the disciples had been arguing about "Who Is the Greatest?" But when he asks them what they were arguing about, he gets silence in return. The narrator has to fill in the silence and then, Jesus has a message for his competitive disciples.

Now we can imagine how this happened, can't we? It began with good intentions... the disciples thinking, if Jesus is going to die who is next in line to take over leadership of this important movement, who will carry on this important work? In this story the disciples make a drastic mistake - they turn ministry into a competition instead of a collaboration.

We hear this when church people get together all the time. How big is your choir? How much did you give to missions? How many attend your church? So on and so forth.

I heard an interesting guest on the Ted Radio Hour. Margaret Heffernan helps companies make work more meaningful and fun. As a consultant she often speaks to companies and organizations and shares a parable applying principals from an experiment with two groups of chickens.

In the Experiment, observing chickens over 6 generations, William Muir followed a flock of average, good ole worker chickens and a second flock of Super Chickens, and compared how many eggs they laid. At the end of the experiment the average flock was doing very well. They were plump, fully feathered, very healthy, and importantly, they were more productive than ever. When Mr. Muir observed the super flock, he noticed all but three were dead. The rest had pecked each other to death.

When Margaret shares this research people immediately understand the implications, they say, "The super flock" that's my company. Or my community. Or my life. Always competing!

We are taught to get ahead by competing... for the right school, the right job... but what the chickens teach us is... if the only way to get ahead is by suppressing the productivity of the rest, then we badly need to find a better way to work and a richer way to live, before... we peck each other to death.

Today, Jesus is trying to prevent his disciples from pecking each other to death. But in the process he does something amazing—he fundamentally redefines what it means to be the greatest. To be the greatest, the Savior says, is to be servant of all, to be first is in some sense to be last.” Or another way we might say this, to be the greatest is to be first in caring, first in sharing, first in helping, first in giving, first in speaking out and first in standing up.

We see the disciples fall into the same rat race in which we sometimes find ourselves. But how did we get into it? How did we miss the lessons Jesus was trying to teach the disciples that day?

Again Margaret Heffernan offers insight, “Say you have super chicken parents, who want to get you into the Super chicken gifted and talented group? Then all the Super chickens kill each other to get into Harvard or Yale? By the time the super chickens get into the work world it is ingrained that our success depends upon the failure of others.

This is why Jesus calls the disciples into a circle. The circle itself is symbolic, right? In a circle we face everyone else. We all have a place; we are equal-distant from each other. No one is up front, no one is in back. A circle indicates community where everyone belongs, everyone has a voice, everyone has power... there are no insiders and outsiders. But then Jesus does a startling thing. He takes a child right into his everlasting arms and makes this child the definitive example of welcome within this alternative community.

Why? Because children are Innocent? I don’t think so. That’s a somewhat fantasized view of children.

Despite the number of children in poverty, or separated from their parents along borders around the world, or lacking access to good health care... we live in a day where we insist that we deeply value children. However, in Jesus day, a child was the lowest on the priority list. Even in Medieval times, Thomas Aquinas taught that in a raging fire a husband was obligated to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child.” Jesus, by embracing the child and speaking about how we welcome one another in the kingdom of God, is saying something extremely provocative in his ancient setting.

In a quid pro quo world Jesus is saying, “Welcome someone who does not have the power, or means, or ability, or place to welcome us in return? Welcome the ones society places little value upon, calls insignificant, the ones we have shaped the world in order to make them powerless? This, Jesus says, has a lot to do with being the greatest.

Theologian Megan McKenna provides a long list of such people who, like children, did not count in Jesus' day, "the old, the handicapped, the sick, the illiterate, the peasants, the farmers, the shepherds, the widows, the slaves, the aliens, the immigrants, the prisoners, and the homeless." And we sadly admit, many of these people still don't count in our world today.

Jesus is reversing the typical flow chart, with the lowest at the top, and the high and mighty much lower, the first being last and the last first. It's the Kingdom of God reversal our Savior is constantly trying to help us understand. To be first, to be the greatest, is to be servant of all who cannot always help themselves.

In frustrating moments we reflect, while we like Jesus' idea, it does not seem very practical. The business world is too dog-eat-dog, it's driven by forced ranking, and management systems based on highest potentials, and promoting the top 10%. So while we like the idea Jesus gives us, it doesn't seem realistic.

That takes me back to the Ted Radio Hour program for a moment, the host RAZ asks Margaret, "Does the regular, good chicken model actually lead to productivity? Margaret's response may stun us, "when companies and organizations build what she calls 'Social Capital' it leads to significantly more productivity."

She shares a few examples, "When one person suggested their company synchronize coffee breaks, so people would have time to collaborate... profits increased \$15 million, and employee satisfaction grew." Margaret tells of going to watch student auditions at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, "I was amazed, if stars mattered anywhere surely it had to be in show biz, but what the teachers there were looking for was not these spectacular fireworks of individuals. They were looking for actors who had something to give each other, because in drama, it's what happens between actors - that is really exciting."

Margaret had the same conversation with producers of hit musical albums, they said, "Oh sure, we have lots of superstars in music. It's just that most of them don't last very long. It's the outstanding collaborators who enjoy long careers because bringing out the best in each other is how they found the best in themselves."

Our Savior, Jesus the Christ, has given us a roadmap for living into an entirely new way of working and being. A pattern that teaches us when we work together we all thrive. The church has known this a long time, though sometimes we get amnesia... the root for all successful ministry and mission in the church: collaboration, not competition.

Empowered by Christ, Gifted by the Holy Spirit, led by the creator, we have the opportunity to continue our collaboration today. Following worship Rev. Lisa has set up a Marketplace of gathering groups in response to needs identified in the Appreciative Inquiry Process, and interests shared through a congregation wide survey during the summer. We have another opportunity to follow Jesus by gathering in groups, and teams, and committees and boards; and

like that 6 generations of the average flock of Chickens, we will find that we all flourish, and even more importantly, Christ's ministry and mission will flourish too.

Amen