

When people hear “the last will be first and the first last” I often wonder if they worry about which one they are. Am I the last...or am I first?

We are so prone to measure ourselves. We compare ourselves to others in all sorts of ways. For some people, it's wealth. They want to be the richest. For some it's athletic ability. It can be in terms of looks. In our body image obsessed world, we look too critically at our bodies – are we too fat? Too thin?

Or we compare the abilities of our coworkers to our own. Or we feel guilty when we encounter someone who is truly kind and generous and we feel like we're falling short.

When we measure and compare, we inevitably find ourselves either falling short, or rising above others.

So which are we? Last...or first?

But I want to think about this from a little bit different angle...the angle of vulnerability. Let's look first at Jesus' actions and words with the little child.

First we need a little cultural grounding. We are a society which adores...in fact almost reveres children. When parents look at their calendars and checkbooks, it can look like their kids are the center of the universe. Sometimes parents will even say that.

Not so in the first century in Jesus' world – the world of peasants. No doubt parents loved their children, but they were not the center of the universe.

Young children especially were at the very bottom of the social rankings. They couldn't pay their way and were totally dependent on parents and extended families who were likely already stretched thin economically.

Half of them died before the age of 1. No small number of mothers died from complications of childbirth, leaving children without a mother. And there were no social programs to take care of orphaned children or poor people.

Young children were no doubt loved by their families who just hoped they lived long enough to make their own way. But they were largely ignored by society at large. Children were the most vulnerable of all people in Jesus' world.

Jesus says, When you welcome one such as this little child, you are welcoming me.

With those words, Jesus is making clear his own willingness to be vulnerable. So, if that's the case, maybe we would benefit from some reflection on that.

Most often when I've preached these passages, I focus most on the social aspects. We are a culture who is all in on being first.

From early childhood we want to be fastest, strongest, most powerful, richest, most admired, most successful...and we hold those values for our nation as well. Jesus words cast an uncomfortable shadow on such beliefs.

That remains a good way to look at it. We are called to care for the most vulnerable among us in tangible ways...feeding the poor and advocating for things that can make their lives better. Welcoming immigrants and helping them get their new life started. Caring for the sick. Restorative justice. Loving those we'd rather not.

But even beneath the charitable things that we do, we often still hang on to that notion of superiority.

Is it possible that we are called to reflect on our own vulnerability? We don't even probably like the word. It's associated with weakness or defenselessness, and we certainly don't like that.

And if we get down to it, we probably associate it with being inferior. Quite often, when the nagging fear that we're inferior in some way crops up, our ego comes roaring back to protect that frightened, vulnerable person inside us.

It can be forever an up and down...either better than everyone, or facing the world with a heart full of shame and doubts about our worth.

At first when you hear Jesus say "the last will be first and the first last" it might seem like that just keeps this pendulum swing going forever.

But what if, instead, we are all being called to embrace vulnerability...our own and that of others? To realize that all of us are sometimes first and sometimes last?

It's not about one of us moving up and another moving down...it's about recognizing that we are all vulnerable in some way...vulnerability can be a great equalizer.

Some of us actually are economically vulnerable. Some live one layoff or illness or car breakdown away from true poverty and even homelessness.

Some of us are vulnerable because of addictions and habits that rob us of peace and a sense of well-being.

Some of us are vulnerable because of illness or advancing age.

Many of us are vulnerable to fears for the safety and well-being of loved ones, especially our children. In fact, we are quite often generally vulnerable to the fear of death.

Some are vulnerable because of past trauma that makes them feel damaged and ashamed.

Some are vulnerable to the need to constantly prove themselves superior to everyone else...to avoid the crushing fear that they might in fact be nobodies.

We are all vulnerable to guilt, shame, and heartbreak. And ultimately, we are all vulnerable to death.

What if, instead of all the defense mechanisms we put up, we just came to terms with our vulnerability, and that of everyone else?

What if we quit needing to hide from our insecurities and fears and just admit that a part of being human is not always having it all together?

What if we didn't look down on the vulnerability of others as a sign of weakness or inferiority? Instead, what if we recognize that deep down, we know we all share that aspect of humanity?

In my mind, that's really what Lent...but especially Ash Wednesday is about. It's about being honest with ourselves.

It's about bringing our vulnerabilities to Jesus and being willing to have our ego crucified so that we are no longer so bent on measuring and comparing ourselves to others.

Because what we are ultimately talking about here is Jesus and his own willingness to be completely and totally vulnerable to all the worst that people could do to him...people who had their own struggles with vulnerability and the dangerous ego mechanisms they use to strike back.

Tonight, as you receive the ashes, it is our vulnerability we recognize. We recognize that our fear of being vulnerable sometimes leads our ego to lash out in ways we think will help, but instead make things worse.

We recognize we are vulnerable to death...that we are mortal.

The ashes we receive are a sign of that mortality...you came from dust and to dust you will return. But we receive those ashes in the shape of a cross, in recognition that Jesus went to the cross, totally vulnerable, out of love for us.

And that in him, our constant need to measure up and our constant fear that we don't both die and we are raised to our true humanity.