

I made one brilliant decision as a new mom. My church had burned down and I was trying to study for doctoral exams, so I had less than no time to keep a journal of motherhood. But I did have a wall calendar, and so on it I jotted down the milestones. When Kristen started to talk, she never stopped. So I kept good notes on her standup comedy routine.

Here are some gems: Age 28 months: Preparing for a children’s sermon, I said, “Kristen, what do you think of rules?” “I have no rules!” At 30 months: “I make the rules!” I said, “Kristen, put the cap back on the toothpaste.” “I can’t do it because I’m going to a meeting.” Age 3: “Kristen, you have to remember to be polite, say please and thank you.” “I’m just not built for that.” Hank and I sometimes worried what we had created, but she assured us: “God and Jesus love me very much. Everybody loves me. I’m the best kid in the world.”

Looking back, I don't know how her parents who had so many insecurities growing up, managed to raise such a confident daughter. But there were times when I was a bit concerned, because I know there's a fine line between self-confidence and arrogance and it can be hard to know when we've crossed it.

Do you remember back when boasting was not something you wanted to be caught doing? Remember when it was considered very bad form to toot your own horn? Years ago, it was not uncommon to hear the old proverb: "Pride goeth before a fall." [Prov 16:18 KJV]

That comes from the Bible. So does this: The Lord says... "Pride and arrogance are the way of evil and perverted speech I hate." [8:13] And "A person's pride will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor." [29:23]

Lowliness of spirit. That's a quality you won't see on many break room posters! Since Puritan days it seems we've done a 180.

We went from making people think they are lower than worms to encouraging them to think they are Number One.

The comic strip *Pearls Before Swine* captured it well this week. Rat says “I am the most successful guy in the world.” Goat says, “Why do you say stuff like that when you know it’s just not true.” Rat responds, “Because self-delusion is the same as success, only you don’t have to work as hard.” Goat shouts out, “Truth still matters!” Rat answers, “Sorry, can’t hear you in my ego bubble.”

That’s the real challenge of parenting: How do we instill in our children a sense of self-worth without putting them in an ego bubble? How do we give them self-respect without over-inflating their self-importance? How do we convince them that God thinks they are good without giving them the idea that they have to be the greatest?

In Mark’s Gospel today, the disciples are arguing about who is the greatest. This is right after Jesus has told them that the Son of Man will be betrayed and killed and after three days rise again. The

text says that the disciples do not understand what Jesus is saying, but I think they understand well enough, because in the very next scene they are fighting over who is the greatest. It sounds as if they are arguing about who will take his place. Who is next in line to Jesus and who is going to run the show when he's gone?

To be honest, by the standards of this world, Jesus' disciples are not all that great. They are not rich, famous, or powerful. They are not well-bred or well-connected. Even by the standards of God's world, the disciples are not going to win any awards. Compared to Jesus, they are not very charismatic. They are not nearly as wise or as fearless, and we know that they are not as faithful.

Jesus is half-listening to them argue, and he knows that people who have to boast about being the greatest are usually the people who are afraid of being the smallest. It's the folks with fragile egos who are always looking for opportunities to inflate them. What does Jesus say to them?

Like a kindergarten teacher, Jesus sits down and calls the twelve to him and says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Now Jesus might as well have said, “You have to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge” because being last of all and servant of all sounds pretty suicidal here in Silicon Valley. Everything is a competition here, from getting a parking space to getting your kid into the right preschool so they can get into the right college so they can be a success.

Unbelievably, Jesus is saying that none of this matters. For us, success is getting a degree that will get you a job that comes with a salary that will allow you to buy a home in Silicon Valley. But Jesus doesn't want us to be a success. He wants us to be a servant. Instead of being first, we have to be last, which means putting ourselves and our own interests last. And that goes against everything we have ever learned right from the first.

What Jesus is saying here is that we have to let go of our ego.

That's extremely hard to do, and I have an idea why. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to let go of our ego if we never had a very strong one to begin with.

Richard Rohr talks about how important it is for children to have strong boundaries or what he calls a "safe container" so they can form a stable identity. Of course, they need love. They also need laws. They need freedom, but they also need restrictions. Strong boundaries make for a strong sense of self. Rules give children something to push against so in the process they can discover who they are. At the same time, forgiveness gives them something to lean against on those occasions when they go too far.

If children make it through adolescence and into adulthood with their container intact, they are in a much better position to let it go. If they know they are loved, they are going to be more able to take the risk of giving that love away. Because they know that someone else put them first, there's a far better chance that they will someday choose to put themselves last.

A lot of the pain and suffering that goes on in this world can be explained by the simple fact that too many people didn't have a safe container in which to grow up, so they don't have a self that is strong enough to give away. Because these adults are so insecure, they have to go to great lengths to protect themselves and sometimes end up doing harm to others.

We used to call our leaders "public servants" because we expected them to put the people first and their own interests last. Nowadays, politicians spend so much time protecting their egos, they have little time to serve the public.

Yet politicians are not the only people who want to be first without ever having to be last. We, too, want to be a success far more than we want to be a servant. And so we ask, "If the disciples couldn't do it, how are we supposed to?"

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Jesus knew that this was a hard saying, so he "took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’”

On one level, Jesus chooses a child, who in his day always came in last, and he puts her first. That way his disciples know that if they want to be first they must serve the last. Ever since then, following Jesus has always meant welcoming children and caring for them. That’s why at Willow Glen we commit such a large portion of our budget to ministries with children, and not just our own children.

But I wonder whether Jesus is also saying that we must welcome the child within us, the child that may or may not have had the safe container that she needed growing up, the child that may or may not have developed a strong enough sense of identity that he could risk letting go of his ego, the child who is still trying to be first because she is afraid that she will disappear altogether if she is last.

Even at this late stage of our lives, we can learn to let go of our ego. And that’s because even if our parents never provided us



with a safe container, Jesus can. So let's go back to that place in our development when the container failed us, when it didn't give us the support we needed, didn't hold strong so we could push against it or didn't forgive us when we did. By going back to welcome the child we once were, we can welcome the God who always is and become the child we have always had the birthright to be.

To those who still can't let go of their ego, Jesus says, "Let me welcome that child in you who was always afraid to be last, always worried that someone would think they were least, always waiting for someone to tell them to get lost. Give that child to me, and then I will give you the strength to welcome every such child in my name. By loving and serving the last in your world, you will come to know what it's like to be first in mine."

Last week, I got out the old calendars, and Hank and Kristen and I read through them. She was always a kick in the pants. Once in a while, she got me in the gut, like when she said: "Why do

preachers have a long job?” And “Can you grow down so you don’t have to work so long?”

Even before Kristen was conceived I wondered if it were really fair for a pastor to have a family. I worried that I wouldn’t be there often enough to make the container strong enough so that she could safely push against it and in the process become her own beautiful person. By the sheer grace of God, we made it. Hank and I dropped Kristen off at UC Davis yesterday morning. I dashed back to do a wedding and finish a sermon and it still hasn’t hit me.

I know that Hank and I will miss our daughter mightily, but at least we can take some comfort in knowing that we have many more children of God to love and to serve. Follow Jesus and your nest will never be empty because when you welcome them, you welcome him, and when you welcome him, you welcome the One who sent him. Amen.