

The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

What does that mean? Jesus has just given a laudatory affirmation of his predecessor John the Baptist, who was imprisoned by King Herod and soon to be executed. *What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? . . . Someone dressed in fine clothing? . . . I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist.* That's saying a mouthful! Last Sunday you had a glimpse of why John was so praised. He was a one-person-opposition-party, taking on not only the Temple authorities but also causing the royal authorities worry over his outspoken exposure of their lax allegiance to Judaism's biblical heritage.

And yet now Jesus seems to undercut his extreme praise of John's prophetic stature by saying: *Nevertheless, the least resident of the kingdom of heaven is greater than he!* If John has been greater than anyone "born of women", how can he be inferior to anybody?

One way to approach this is to think "accreditation". Jesus is grading John the Baptist as the A+ of all A+s that have ever been born. (This reminds me of my first year at Catholic University when after struggling through a semester in Physics I approached my professor and asked what grade I should try for during the looming finals. And he said: "If I were you I would try to attain the highest grade possible, like an A+ which would allow you a D- for the semester." The result? I studied all day and night and passed.)

We live in a world of accreditation, having to prove yourself worthy of a contribution to society, to abide by laws, regulations, win (not lose), don't look back, someone may be gaining on you (thank you, Satchel Paige). We are under some kind of evaluation or judgment every day – nor do we need anybody else to do the judging; we judge ourselves sometimes mercilessly. And many a person wilts under the constant need to climb the ladder, measure up . . . So in evaluating John the Baptist so highly Jesus was speaking from the accreditation side of the ledger – where the Law, Accountability held sway – as it does in our everyday both religious and secular worlds.

But notice the pivot Jesus makes after praising John: *Nevertheless the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.* What is this kingdom of heaven? It's the realm of pure grace into which Jesus and his Gospel would lead the human race – where we are bathed baptismally into an experience of Being that cares, where credentials no longer sort us out as winners and losers, worthless and worthy, this race or that, a plus or a minus – but all are one in solidarity with Being (I am who Am) itself. You are and I am and she is and they are – as much as trees and roses and clouds and galaxies are.

I mean the fundamental thing about you is that you *are* – which is already a manifestation of God as grace. We forget that. Which is something the parables of Jesus understand. Grace is something we lose touch with in a world of "justification" – and so we must recover it as a buried mustard seed, as buried yeast, as buried treasure – all of which implies – our resurrection into fullness of life.

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