

While we give the apostles a lot of honor, the reality is that before they became saints the apostles were a group of people who needless to say often did not get it. And perhaps no better example of that is there than our Gospel from Mark today.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” They don’t beat around the bush. Then Jesus asks what they would like for him to do. And they cut to the chase: “Grant that in your glory, we may sit one at your right and the other at your left.” When Jesus speaks of the suffering that He’ll be undergoing referring to the cup He will drink, that part doesn’t register. But the glory part does. The other ten aren’t happy about this, but really they’re thinking the same thing too.

And let’s face it, we can be the same way too, perhaps in a not-talk-about-it directly Minnesota passive-aggressive kind of way. It’s nice to be noticed or seen. But truth be told, it’s through many simple actions that such a big difference can be made when we take the focus off of ourselves, and worry less about being seen and more about letting our actions do the talking, actions of love and service.

For me, a true inspiration has been Pope Francis, as time and time again he has shown incredible humility, despite the power of his position. Consider some of these things that he’s done.

On Holy Thursday in his first year as pope, Pope Francis washed the feet of 12 criminal offenders. This included two women, one a Serbian Muslim.

Instead of living in the opulent papal apartments, Francis opted to live in a Vatican residence alongside visiting clergy and lay people. “I’m visible to people and I lead a normal life - a public Mass in the morning, I eat in the refectory with everyone else, et cetera,” he wrote to a Vatican priest, Father Enrique Martinez. “All this is good for me and prevents me from being isolated.” A day after being chosen pope, he returned to his guest house, thanked the staff - and personally paid the bill.

In July on his first trip abroad, “Where’s my briefcase?” He asked. The papal entourage had arrived at Fiumicino Airport in Rome. He had been pope for just four months and was now bound for Rio de Janeiro, where 3.5 million young people from 178 countries were waiting to greet him at World Youth Day in Brazil. And he could not find his briefcase.

“It’s been taken on board the plane,” an aide explained.

“But I want to carry it on,” said the pontiff.

“No need, it’s on already,” the assistant replied.

“You don’t understand,” said Francis. “Go to the plane. Get the bag. And bring it back here please.”

Members of the press, who were already waiting on the plane, soon saw from their windows that Pope Francis was moving purposefully through a crowd of functionaries to the aircraft, carrying a black briefcase in his left hand. This was a story: Popes had never before carried their own luggage.

When he went to Rio, he made sure to visit slums. The shantytown is so violent that locals call it Brazil's Gaza Strip. Weeks earlier, the pope had invited 200 homeless people to dinner at the Vatican; afterward, he gave each a gift pack with pastries, fresh fruit and a rosary.

At the papal mountainside retreat, he would meet the crowds for prayer right at the front door. He commented, "why a balcony? I can speak from my doorstep."

As cardinal and archbishop of Buenos Aires, he lived in a small apartment rather than the archbishop's palace, cooked his own meals and used public transportation.

And he famously said five words: "who am I to judge?" when at a press conference referring to how he would act as a confessor to a gay person. His point as he said was he was paraphrasing by heart the Catechism of the Catholic Church where it says these people should be treated with delicacy and not marginalized. The point was he was starting as Jesus would, with the human person and putting the other first with mercy and compassion.

The humility in his life developed over time, but really stems from a period when he was essentially living in exile. Due to politics within the Jesuits, in 1990, he was sent to Cordoba to pray, work on a doctoral thesis, but wasn't even to say Mass in public in the Jesuit church. He could hear confessions but that was it. He also couldn't make phone calls without permission, and had his letters controlled. Prior to this in his late 30s he was provincial superior of the Jesuits, in charge of them all in Argentina. Two-thirds though did not much care for him,

You might think someone who had been treated this way might plot revenge, but not Bishop Jorge Bergoglio. He had cracked down on "Liberation Theology" within the Jesuits, and progressives said he was too conservative. And looking back at that point in his priesthood, he admits he was a bit too authoritarian.

And so removed from being a seminary rector, he went to Cordoba, where another priest said of him it was a place of "humility and humiliation." He spent his time looking out the window and walking the streets, from the Jesuit residence to the church along a road that passed through many different areas of the city. People from all walks of life—academics, students, lawyers, and ordinary folk—visited the church for the penitential sacrament. He found his interactions with the poor particularly moving. And he also admits that looking back on his younger years he made as he put it "hundreds of errors" in how he handled things. When in 1992 he returned and was named auxiliary bishop, it wasn't about settling the score. He became more a delegator and participative. He was known to end all encounters by asking the other person to pray for him.

According to an article on him, the reporter states: "For the new Bergoglio, humility was more like an intellectual stance than a personal temperament—a tool he developed in his struggle against what he had learned were the weaknesses in his own personality, with its rigid, authoritarian, and egotistical streaks." And that's something that's continued into his papacy.

The humility and growth that Pope Francis saw in his life is something we are all called to emulate as well if we want to become spiritually great. The problem can be ego can be such a big stumbling block, and we can forget that it's really not about us, but about pointing the way to God through our works and actions.

In this week's Gospel, James and John are pretty direct in their request. Odds are they are quite young; John was likely a teenager, and his brother wouldn't be too far in age from him. But all of the apostles exhibit spiritual immaturity at various points, but they grow into greatness by all understanding what it really means to drink the cup of Jesus, which entails suffering, but also loving God and others by serving them rather than being served. That's our challenge too. So how to do it?

As a starting point, we have to remember it's not about us. No parent would say they help a child to learn to read or provide for their needs so the child will praise them; rather they make so many sacrifices because of the love they have for their child. But as we age, sometimes we can cling to ego or being noticed. Remember that whoever wishes to be great must be a servant, for Jesus came to serve and not be served. We are always to be Christians for others too, whatever our circumstances, wherever we are. So concretely, I think we have to make sure that we never do things with in the back of our minds thinking won't it be great because people will know I did this, or doing them for the sake of being seen or acknowledged. The glory can't be on us, but it has to be always on God, who sees the many good things we do and will remind us of them when we stand before Him.

So too, must we acknowledge our interdependence. Jesus identified greatness with sacrifice, not with being a master who gave orders. I obviously did not know Pope Francis when he was the head of a country's religious order in his late 30s. He could have been a great leader for all I know, but by his own admission he says he was a little bit too controlling at that point in his life. James and John want the crown, but maybe they needed to think about the words of Saint John the Baptist: He must increase, I must decrease. We all can have positions of authority at various points in our lives, but how do we use it? Do we collaborate and work with others? Do we acknowledge when maybe we should listen to them or another person can do something better than us?

Third, can we accept the fact that we have weaknesses and are sinners? As Pope Francis said famously in an early interview when asked who he was, he responded "a sinner." In our second reading from Hebrews, the author tells us "let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses." It's important to remember that we need God and others as well to truly

grow. Sometimes when we struggle with pride, we fail to ask for help or are blind to our struggles. That's why it's important to go to confession, to do a daily examination of conscience and Act of Contrition, and to also have people in our lives who will give it to us straight and who we can count on to tell us not what we want to hear but what we need to hear. We need to hear forgiveness, but we also need to hear the voice of our conscience or others who may call us to look at things we don't want to acknowledge. We must remember that our dignity comes not from things we do or can do, but rather it comes from what we are - a human being created in God's image and from what God makes us into, namely children of God by adoption through grace. We must always open ourselves up to that grace by growing in it.

Fourth, in this day and age we we can be so polarized, can we strive to also truly listen to others and see their humanity first, remembering the serve others part doesn't have exceptions to it. I can't imagine how much stress Pope Francis must have in his life in particular with people who are his critics that he faced throughout his time as a priest and bishop. It goes with the territory of being a public person. But what has struck me is how he has never lashed out at people publicly or condemned them. And as he stated he ends conversations asking the person to pray for him. For us, if we are governed by ego, we can talk over others or become condescending because in the back of our minds we can start with "I'm right, he/she is wrong, and I have to fix them" whether we want to convert them to our faith or our political beliefs. Make no doubt about it, I am certainly strong in what I believe as a Catholic, and have very strong political views. But I strive to always start with the person. An attitude of humility allows us to first listen to someone and where they are coming from before we then get into discussions or trying to change their viewpoints. It also allows us to find common ground. And while it could be that a person is in error on Church teachings or doesn't see the truth of something, there are other things that they recognize that we don't, and by having an attitude of humility and service towards them, we too might grow in our faith, and odds are by being patient and seeing them as an equal, rather than as someone who perhaps just "doesn't get it", we can truly bring about change both in them and ourselves.

And last, what should always guide us is that real power comes from using our strength to help others. Jesus is the model; the Son of Man who comes not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. When you look at Pope Francis, you don't see a man who is hidden. You see a pope who is engaged; who is willing to challenge; who serves the poor and who cares so deeply for so many. The lordship you and I are given as Christians is that of service to one another, so we too must always challenge ourselves to serve one another and open our eyes to the needs of all, realizing that whether it's helping someone under our own roof with homework or listening to them or volunteering in our parish, we can bring about so much good.

James and John knew Jesus was great, they just needed to learn what greatness was all about, and sometimes we do as well. We can all do great things, but the greatest thing of all is to help a person realize how much they are loved, which takes place through thousands of unseen actions and may never be acknowledged - but God will know what we did, and we will be rewarded. May we learn as Saint James and John did

to strive for that true greatness which comes from serving God by bringing His love to all who need it, realizing that we might not get a statue in our honor, notoriety or fame, but we'll get done something amazing, a seat at Jesus' right and left hand not because we earned it through our merits, but because we responded to His invitation to drink of the cup which meant suffering and service, but through which we and others we loved and served were led to the heavenly kingdom.