Have you ever come in last at something? It’s an interesting experience to say the least. I remem

ber once our family was going to a movie theatre somewhere in Colorado. And it was one of those Imax theatres or something. And I remember what happened, because we were the last people to get in. And so we walked into huge theatre. And of course if your first you get best seats, you know, somewhere in the middle because it’s this huge screen. And then everybody sort of fills in from there getting the best seat they can. And slowly the farther back in line you are the worst seats you get. So we were the very last. And I remember walking into the theatre and thinking there just aren’t any seats left. And everyone is sort of looking at you. Because they know where the seats are. And so you walk down in front of everyone to very bottom row and at the very end of the bottom row there a couple of empty seats. You’ve made it to the bottom. It’s an interesting experience.

In just about everything we do, somebody comes in last. We’re into sports in this neck of the woods and if you’re in track and field for example, in every event someone will come in last. I remember in college I ran track and one of the things that I often said was that, “well, at least I never came in last”. I don’t think I ever did, though I did fear it. That was my achievement. There is always the team with the worst record in the league. When I coached baseball it was always Western. And I don’t ever remember being on one of those teams either. But it was true in the business world I was in for a while. We had a group of salesmen and there was always one guy who came in last. He just wasn’t that great at selling.

Our world is built around competition in everything. And so somebody somewhere comes in last. In appearance, in strength, in beauty, in smarts. There is always the ugliest, the weakest, the dumbest. We all like to think of our country as the greatest, we expect to reassure ourselves constantly that we are, but somewhere in the world there is the country that come in last. Fewest jets or bombs might be the criteria. It comes with life. Somewhere in the pack of dogs, there is the bottom dog. It’s organized into the fabric of our creation, wired into our DNA the sociologists tell us. We organize into dominance hierarchies, and when we walk into a room we look around and sort of compare ourselves to everyone else, hoping that that at least we’re average or are making a good show of it.

Like I said earlier, being last is probably something that for the most part we fear. It’s associated of course with failure and defeat. You haven’t made much of yourself if you come in last. No awards are given for being last place, and if they are it doesn’t really mean that much. And it’s an interesting feeling and experience to say the least, to realize that in whatever activity that you are engaged in, everybody who is in it is better or higher up than you.

So it is interesting to say the least, that Jesus would tell his disciples today that if you want to be the greatest, or the first, the best, or the crème of the crop that you have to be last. Last in line. Last place. And a servant, which was the same thing. Then he places a child in front of them, which in this society would be the people of lowest rank and influence, and says that to welcome this person who is the least important is to welcome him. So that kid who crosses the finish line last in the race, that salesman at the bottom of the rankings, that person at the bottom of the pecking order is actually first in some way. And when you welcome that kind of person, that person who comes in last, you welcome the creator of the universe.

This is a fairly broad and all encompassing biblical theme. When God chose the nation of Isreal to be his people, it would have been hard to find a people who better fit the notion of last. In the world of the middle east nations, Israel was surely the baseball team from Western. The great Nations of Assyria and Babylon were far superior in every way. But God chose the smallest, the least important, last in line to be his people. St. Paul who wrote most of the New Testament said about himself in 1 Corinthians 15:9 that he was the “least of all the apostles”. Last in line when it came to apostleship, and he knew it. And certainly the story of Jesus is the story of one who was equal to God, but whose earthly life ended with him finishing dead last. No home, no family, friends who all abandoned him, crucified on a cross as a traitor to his country. There could be no story which ended in greater failure than the story of Jesus of Nazaruth. Jesus would live these words he speaks today. And without that there would have been no Easter. Because there is something about finishing last, there’s something about that kid who crosses the finish line in last place that communicates a great truth than winning. That cuts through to the heart. The serves us well. That is the source of a deeper connection to each other. That opens up the reality of what we call Grace and mercy.

Maybe some of us might hear this as kind of put down for wanting to win. Of going after the gold medal or winning the prize. Moving up the ladder of success. I don’t think that’s it. I don’t think Jesus is trying to look down on the successful. Or the fast runners, or the beautiful people, or the winning teams, or businesses. I can’t see anything inherently wrong with our systems of competition, which often bring out the best of what we are capable of. It seems that a good competition is often a really helpful thing, and brings out a real joy in living. I don’t see anything wrong with being competitive.

What the problem is however, is when one begins to associate God with coming out on top. That success and glory and winning and prosperity is what we mean by God’s blessing. That needs to be challenged very directly. That cannot become ideology, a kind of fixed assumption, an unquestionable truth. It’s something that is assumed without thinking, that because the numbers are good it’s a sign of God’s blessing. This becomes very problematic when Christianity is associated with beginning to believe that God is on our side because we’re number 1, or the greatest. Jesus challenged this in Isreal directly, he challenged the religious establishment that supported this.

Success isn’t wrong, winning isn’t bad, but you can’t associate it directly with Gods will. When you’re at the game praying that your kids team wins, and on the other side they’re praying that their team wins, that’s not what it’s about. This kind of spirituality is in our lesson today when the disciples are silent when Jesus asks them what they are arguing about. Yeah, who’s the greatest. Who is number #1. Who is going to win. Because that’s how they understand God’s blessing. Good Fortune. That’s what is being challenged today. Jesus is saying that Greatness, or being number #1 is found in the lowest place, not the greatest. You want to be first, if you want to be great, learn about the God who meets you when you finish last. The God who shows up as the bottom dog.

This week in the news, there’s been quite a bit of press regarding this whole issue of social media, specifically Instagram. Now I don’t do Instagram and spend very little time on Facebook. Facebook live is good for us, and I really appreciate that. But the issue here being addressed is the way that these social media platforms are really messing with people’s heads, especially young people and especially I guess younger girls. What’s happening is simply what has always happened, it’s just more intense, because so many more people are involved. You can just see so many more people now. What’s the problem? We all know this, I hear it all the time. People just put on Facebook what they want you to see. And because there are millions of people on these things, you start to see very little other than beautiful people at their best, with their awesome homes and beautiful children, and all their cool new toys and trips with their friends, and on and on an on. And if you an old guy like me, hopefully you know by now. You know that’s not really how their life is.

But it’s powerful and I do admit once in a while I get sucked in too. But what if you’re 14 and you grow up with this stuff? Or a junior high girl that just looks at all these billions of pictures of beautiful people and all their awesomeness all day? You know after a while, you might start feeling like your what? Yeah, Last. Man, my life isn’t like that. How can reality compete with a fantasy? It can’t.

And that’s why Jesus says, if you want to be first be last. Because when you’re last, it’s so easy to believe that you need to be stronger, prettier, faster, smarter, richer. But the truth is, I think, no matter who we are, that underneath what we often see, we’re all like that. We need to help people realize that where it seems like they’re last, or least, is what everyone struggles with. And its where they can really find the Grace and the connection and the real people that they really need. I don’t measure up to all that. Well, you don’t have to. See, God always shows up in the last place you would expect. You’re a real person who knows they can’t measure up to all this success and glory? Welcome to God’s kingdom, where you can be who you really are.

Next time you begin feel like you’re coming in last, it would be a good lesson to remember. You’re actually where everyone often feels but you rarely see. It’s a place where we really meet each other in a much deeper way than on the victory stand. And it’s the place where we meet God and begin to understand his love. Amen.