

We used to have a friend when we lived in Omaha who was in recovery from addiction. When he'd describe the way he was growing up and before recovery, he'd say he was as an egomaniac with an inferiority complex.

I sometimes think of that when I read all the passages in the Bible where Jesus says the last will be first and the first last. What I realize is that in any given moment, I'm pretty good at being either one.

There have been times in my life when my ego has gotten the better of me and I think I know more than anyone else and people just ought to do things my way.

Other times I've been so disappointed in myself that I feel like some kind of creature slinking under a rock.

I'd have to say that thankfully, both tendencies have diminished. I think that's partially due to age, and hopefully even more, some spiritual growth. But I suspect they'll never go completely away until the ultimate healing in resurrection.

I wonder sometimes when people hear "the last will be first and the first last" if they too wonder which one they are. Am I the last...or am I first?

As we begin this season of Lent, I want to reflect on the last will be first and first last in terms of vulnerability. Let's look first at Jesus' actions and words with the little child.

First 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.

30% 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.

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. And rather than giving in to an inferiority complex, 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 recognize we've seen ourselves 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 vulnerable to the fear of death.

Some are vulnerable because of past trauma that makes them feel damaged and somehow to blame.

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 it's a part of being human?

What if we didn't look down on the vulnerability of others because of what we see as weakness or inferiority, because deep down, we know we 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 both the egomaniac and the inferiority complex crucified.

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.

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, both the egomaniac and the inferiority complex die and we are raised to our true humanity.