

I still dream about Bobby Foster. Bobby was the most popular boy in the 6th grade. All the other boys wanted to be like Bobby Foster. If Bobby Foster ate his green beans, everybody ate his green beans. Bobby was at the top of the pecking order. You'll recall that the brutal pecking order among homosapiens really takes serious shape around the 6th grade when hormones begin their assault on unsuspecting children. And pecking orders are rough.

We have chickens; the reason the ladder from the greatest to the least, the first to the last is called a pecking order is because the lesser chickens get pecked, sometimes with great injury. Anyone who thinks Nature is gentle and soothing to the spirit should come to our chicken coop and take a look around. As Christie said shortly after a raccoon invasion, *"Farm Life is Hell."*

Well, so is middle school, at least in my recollection. Bobby Foster was at the top of the pecking order, and I was somewhere down the ladder, both pecking and being pecked. But, I desperately wanted to be at the top, to be the greatest or near the greatest. This desire to be in the "Inner Ring" as C.S. Lewis called it, is embedded deep within us. It's the reason I still dream about Bobby Foster! It so shaped my 12 year-old psyche that Bobby Foster – the manifestation of the greatest – lives on in my subconscious.

This pecking order, and the desire to be at the top, continues all through life, of course. Nietzsche called it the "will to power" and it can make not just farm life hell, but life hell for those outside the inner ring.

Christie and I started dating in college. She was a member of Tri-Delt, then known as a snooty sorority, although Christie herself was anything but snooty. But, there was a dumpster outside the Tri-Delt house on which somebody had spray-painted, "Snobby Dumping Only." Apparently only those of a certain socioeconomic bracket were allowed to place their refuse there. I think the Tri-Delts accepted that graffiti designation as a badge of honor.

You can find a version of that Dumpster in every arena of life, of course. I won't belabor the marks of power that put one at the top of the pecking order. You know them: money, residence, memberships, achievement, ethnicity, charisma, material possessions, academic accomplishment, physical beauty. The list of things in which one may peck or be pecked is endless.

This will to power is not new, obviously. And its brutal repercussions go far beyond 6th grade hormones and college dumpsters. Sometimes the will to power goes unrecognized by the wielder, with colossal damage to others. As author and child psychiatrist Dorothy Martin says, *"History is strewn with the wreckage left by*

heads of government who were unconscious of the infantile wish for power that resided in them, as it does in all of us, although it is largely hidden from our view."

We see the wish for power at work in this morning's gospel. The disciples are fighting for their spots on the pecking order, or as the text says "*they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.*" And they tried to hide the wish for power from Jesus' view.

But Jesus, to whom all hearts are open and all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid, is aware of their wrangling over the pecking order. So He sits them down and in a single fell swoop, completely turns the world's power structure on its head. "*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.*"

Then to make his point visually, he takes a child on his lap. The child is an acted parable here. The child is the epitome of last and servant. In fact, the Aramaic word for child and servant is the same word. If you want to be first, Jesus says, then be like this child, who is last. Think about it, a child is powerless, dependent, non-planning and has no political or economic power. And on top of that, a child is not tall enough for some rides!

And a servant, the other descriptor of top pecking order status, serves others at their whim. A servant executes another's will - not his own. A servant cleans or cooks or cares for another. A servant helps others lives to be better or easier. A servant exists for the sake of the other. And as Jesus says, if you want to be first, you will be the servant not just of some others, but of all others.

Jesus delivers a major shot across the bow of the normal human pecking order. According to Jesus, power should be used for the sake of others not the self. How would this play out if the pecking order got turned upside down after the fashion of Jesus' mandate this morning?

Well, husbands, who according the Bible are to lead their wives, would lead by loving and serving their wives instead of themselves.

Heads of businesses or corporations would do all they could to encourage and serve their employees. And companies themselves would exist not for their own sake but for the sake of the good of others.

Professors would consider it a privilege to teach and serve their students. That, by the way, is what made the Late Reverend Dr. Justin Holcomb such a popular professor at UVA - he truly loved and served his students. And his students knew that - that's why there were always long waiting lists for his classes.

Let's include us - Christ Church in this example list. We are the "First Church" of Charlottesville, established before any other Church. But, informed by the gospel this morning, we would consider ourselves last. We would consider ourselves

servants – servants of one another and servants of Charlottesville and servants of the world. If we are to exist, we must exist for the sake of others. (I was very pleased to see in the Parish Profile a strong desire among us to reach out in mission to the community and the world.)

You get the picture of what the picture could be. But of course it usually isn't this way. Husbands love and serve themselves, CEO's are protective of their own bonuses, Professors believe that the students are lucky to receive their wisdom, and even churches lose sight of mission.

It's no secret why the pecking order remains entrenched – power is too tempting for the human heart to resist. J.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings is the best study of this phenomenon. Even the great white wizard Gandalf, who wanted to use the Ring of Power for the good of others, knew he would succumb to its destructive lure. It was Lord Acton, in an 1887 letter to Bishop Creighton, who famously said, *"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."*

Great men are almost always bad men. So true. Great men are almost always bad men. But not always. There was one great man who was also a good man. We hear about him in Paul's letter to the Philippians. *"Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant."* And He didn't stop there.

Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward Angel is a coming of age story about a boy named Eugene Gant. It's set in a small southern city in the early 1900's. In one scene Gant is 12 years old, pecking and being pecked at his school. He's low down the pecking order, but there is one below him – a Jewish boy, the only one in the school. All the boys tormented him; he was the *"target of concentrated abuse."*

Wolfe writes, *"Eugene thought of this young Jew later with piercing shame...For not only did he join in the persecution of the boy – he was also glad at heart because of the existence of someone weaker than himself, someone at whom the flood of ridicule might be directed. Years later it came to him that on the narrow shoulders of that Jew lay a burden he might otherwise have borne, that the over laden heart was swollen with a misery that might have been his."*

Well, the flood of ridicule, the cruel result of the will to power, has been laid on the shoulders of another Jew. Jesus though He was Strong, made Himself weak. Jesus, though He was First, made Himself last. Jesus knew what He was talking about when He sat his disciples down and reversed the pecking order. As He says about Himself *"the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* And he knew the cost of being last. He himself was pecked to death. He did give His life as a ransom for many, for you, and for me. Amen.