

Rev. James Bouzard
September 20, 2009 Sermon
“Great. Just Great”

Whoever wants to be first of all must be last of all... Whoever would be the greatest must be the least.

The least of all was probably the unemployed chicken catcher from a tiny town in Kentucky, but nonetheless it was Kevin Skinner who won the America's Got Talent show this last week. He talks with a mumbly Southern accent that is all but impossible to understand, but when he sings, it's real, as if he has lived every heartbreak his country songs are about. The least likely winner of a national talent competition now has a million dollar prize and a headline show in Las Vegas.

Meanwhile, on my favorite guilty pleasure of a television show, being the least is the point; the least weight, that is. The Biggest Loser, if you haven't seen it, is a competition between remarkably obese people who discover in the process of losing weight a whole new way of living and of thinking about themselves. The greatest becomes the least, at least in terms of mass.

Of course, even becoming the least obese, the Biggest Loser, is a competition, as is in so many other areas of life. I wonder if what really separates us from the lesser beasts is our penchant for turning everything into a competition. There's competitive fishing, which misses the point of fishing entirely, which is to drink beer. There's competitive eating, which is just plain immoral, and that's all I want to say about that. There's competitive interior decorating, for mercy's sake. But I worry less about the declared competitions less than the undeclared; the competition to get into the just right university, for a better grade, to be the biggest, strongest, to be recognized as the one. That kind of competition permeates our lives. It's not always bad; I'd like my mechanic to compete to be the best, and my doctor, too. I wanted my son to be first in his class so that he'd get a mess of scholarships and I could plan to retire someday instead of paying off college loans until I've been dead for ten years. He didn't share my vision, by the way. But when competition is born of pride, then it can be a fierce, life-distorting, life destroying drive. Now this kind of pride isn't school pride; Go Bobcats and all of that. This is pride that Dante defined as "love of self perverted to hatred and contempt for one's neighbor." And yet that is not to say quite enough; there's pride's opposite, but whose effects are the same. It's self-hatred, a sense of worthlessness that is only eased by being better than one's neighbor. Like I said, it's effects are the same as that of pride, so I'll just use the one word for the whole mess. And pride does make a mess; I think of athletes wrecking their bodies with steroids to get an edge in a game they won't play but for a fraction of their lives. I think of what happens in so many work places, where pride leads to hateful things being said and

done, rumors spread all so that someone can feel better about himself or get ahead. On a small scale, I think of how many families are torn by sibling rivalry, or children of divorce whose parents compete for their children's affections by demeaning their ex. On a large scale, I think of the ugly forms of pride called nationalism, or racism, or sexism. I think of political pettiness and intrigue, all born of pride and ambition, and having nothing to do with the welfare of the nation. And because competition born of pride is so intertwined with how we relate to one another, it is almost impossible not to draw this conclusion: Do you want to be the first, the greatest, the best? Then be the most ruthless, the meanest, the toughest. Put your conscience in a box, lock it up and throw away the key.

Maybe I'm being too cynical; it's not always true that the first or greatest are ruthless or mean. But when pride drives us, it can drive us into a ditch, far from where we are intended to be. That's because to be first or the greatest depends on at least two things; pride, of course, and external recognition. That's why Jesus' disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest; it wasn't a title one could grab without someone else saying, "Hold on, pal, who do you think you are?" No, except for Muhammed Ali's famous "I am the Greatest" or in show biz gloss, like the "Great Houdini," to be recognized as first or great is exactly that; an external recognition, an assessment others grant you on which you are then dependent. And you know what; assessments change. The mighty do fall; the once great, not so much any more; like the Great Wizard of Oz, so many once greats turn out to be frauds, or flame out in disgrace, or simply get old and are great no more. We value power and wealth and fame so much; our pride drives us toward those goals, and they turn out to be so transitory, so fleeting, so meaningless. Perhaps you are one who will be able to say, "I'm the greatest artist, or musician, or teacher or author of all time." Good for you, the world can use you. But for most of us, our claims will be smaller; "Hurray, I'm the greatest chief financial officer in the tri-county area. Hurray, I'm the greatest Mortal Kombat player in the 78666 zip code. Hurray."

But I believe there is another way to be great, to be first, and whether it is recognized or not doesn't matter, a way that doesn't fade with time, a way that lasts and is meaningful when everything every other goal and ambition and prideful path has been taken. Jesus points to it, and he lives it as well. It is a *via negativa*, if you will, a negative way, a counterintuitive way, a way that is seldom taken but is worth the journey. He points to it when he says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And then because his followers of then and now are never the brightest of bulbs, he illustrates the point by taking a child in his arms, the least powerful and furthest from the greatest in his day and time and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me." It's all rather enigmatic, I'll admit, but here's what I think he's getting at. True greatness comes not from the external assessments of others. It doesn't come in recognitions or

medals, plaques or statues. Greatness comes through being so sure of one's value and worth that one is able to give oneself away in love and service to others. (Repeat) To such a person, other people's opinions don't matter. Other people's assessments fall by the wayside. A person whose totally confident about her true identity, a person who is completely grounded and certain of who he is can take the risk of ignoring this world's version of values and instead turn to giving himself or herself to others in love. For me, such a grounding, such an identity comes from knowing that I am completely, totally and eternally loved by God in Jesus Christ. That love comes utterly apart from questions of whether I've earned it, whether I've competed for it, whether I deserve it. The answer to that is no; I've not done a thing to deserve it. It is grace, undeserved love, and all the more reason for me then to respond to it with a life of thanksgiving and service, sharing the same gift of undeserved love with those I meet. And particularly, I should add, with the powerless and least of this day, who can't compete, who can't be the best, whose age or poverty or skin color or sexual orientation make them the least able to be the greatest in this world's view. To them it is all the more necessary to speak the truth that is underneath Jesus' words about greatness; the least among us matter. You really matter. You count in God's eyes. Moreover to welcome the least, to serve the least, to become last for their sake is to welcome God into your midst; as Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes such a child welcomes me and the one who sent me."

[Now I know that you and I shop from different catalogs of religious terminology, so I will ask that you make the translation into terms more familiar to UU ears; the best I can do is something like this – there is a holy yes to human existence apart from our accomplishments, and as we live into this "yes" more fully, we are able to let go of other's opinions and our own prideful ambitions, and instead find new life and joy in loving and serving others. How'd I do? If I'm even close, then the implications for every one here is clear, but for this congregation as a whole. You see, I don't believe this is just an individual journey, although it is certainly that, this moving into the yes of human existence. It's also your journey together; you need each other, to bump into each other through your work together, because that bumping into each other is important. It's not easy; pride gets in the way, feelings get hurt, sometimes there is conflict, and no one likes conflict, but in that bumping together, if done with care, you break off more and more chunks of pride until together you become a place where the least are fully welcomed and the yes of human existence is fully celebrated. Because until that day when every one knows that they matter, until that day when pride gives way to gratitude and service, then you've got work to do. You've got a lot of work to do. That may seem daunting and discouraging, but know this; even if we use different terms, you've got partners in this work all over the world, and even across the street at Christ Chapel Campus Ministry. Thank you for letting me share in your journey.]

I can preach a grammatical trainwreck, so I do want to be sure you hear this, a single sentence to sum up what I've said: Despite your past, despite your failures, despite your successes, who you are is one completely loved by God in Jesus Christ, which means that you don't have to play the pride game, but can freely, joyfully love and serve others. I hope you can and will, and that you think about your studies and your life goals with that in mind. And I hope you will keep helping us together give up the pride game, because we need each other. This letting go of being first and greatest isn't just an individual journey, although it is that. We need each other, to bump into each other through our work together, because that bumping into each other is important. As we love each other and care for each other despite our mistakes and flaws, more and more chunks of pride are broken off until together we become a place where the least are fully welcomed and the yes God has spoken to us is heard. Because until that day when every one knows that they matter, until that day when pride gives way to gratitude and service, then we've got work to do. That's a lot of work to do, I know, but on the plus side, we've got Jesus Christ leading the way, the greatest one who served the least, even you and me. Amen.