

It's evident within 3 seconds of getting on an airplane which people are the greatest, and which are not.

They're the ones in the seats large enough to accommodate a grown human being, the ones whose legs are not jammed up against the seat in front of them. The ones who have people waiting on them, serving them food and pillows, giving them a blanket.

We all want to be the greatest on the plane, don't we? Then we can get on first—get off first, and can ignore the rest of rabble who have to sit in seats jammed so close together that we can barely struggle down the aisle with our carry ons.

It's not our fault, I guess. The United States—more than any country in the world—idolizes greatness. We hear it from the day we are born: be number 1!

In my day—I was allowed to have a relatively normal childhood: playing when not in school, having summers off, exploring the world without worries, and for the most part without parents. I didn't have to worry about taking college prep classes until I was in high school.

That had all changed by the time my 29 year old daughter was in elementary school. Children were urged to take the “right” courses, load up on the “right” extracurricular activities—only do things that would look good on their college resume. Only then would they be able to get into the best colleges.

Gone were summers of having fun with their friends—as our children increasingly took some summer courses, or went to interesting camps. Very early in middle and high school they gave up summer freedom to begin searching for internships and jobs that would pad their college resume.

They had to have the greatest application, be the greatest applicant—or they wouldn't never be able to climb the ladder of success. And we bought it—we parents. We wanted the best for our children. We wanted them to be successful. We put them on that ladder at younger and younger ages.

The ladder of success.

Now—in adulthood—we know without even asking where people are on this ladder—and where WE are on the ladder. Like the people in first class on the airplanes we can ignore the rabble who are below us—or if we are a very evolved, kind person- we can offer a hand up to those who would like to climb that ladder.

But even with this kindness, there are many people who will never get to the top of the ladder of success. These are the people who are poor, or foreign, have different color skin, women, people with physical limitations. Oh, some may get there, and try to help others get up there with them, but this is a ladder after all. It's impossible for everyone to be perched on the top rung, isn't it? There will always be those who will never- -through any fault of their own—be able to even grasp the lowest rung of the ladder.

*When Jesus and disciples came to Capernaum; Jesus asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.*

*He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. There is no greatest.”*

I'm sure this makes us—even now—uncomfortable.

*Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

Children—in Jesus' world—much more than ours—had no status. They were not only not on the ladder, they weren't even in the room with the ladder. Children – then—were completely powerless. They had less agency than even the women, or the foreigners, or the poor.

I'll bet the disciples looked puzzled at this complete overturning of "what was what" in their world. Perhaps we feel the same way: "What do you mean we shouldn't strive to climb the ladder of success? That's un-American!" So we bargain: "What if we just help more people onto the ladder—would that be all right, Jesus?"

And Jesus just laughs and says—*"There is no ladder. The ladder is in your mind."*

*"My kingdom has no ladders, nobody who is the greatest. My kingdom only has a table—one big enough for everyone to sit around. One where we can think less about being served, more about how we can hop up from the table and serve each other."*

*"See this little child?" Jesus asks them. "This child isn't thinking about greatness or ladders. This child just wants to participate in everything she sees—not to be the best. She just wants to be part of the group, to participate. She wants to belong and to do her part, and to have FUN."*

*Be more like this child. Stop trying to be the greatest. And for heaven's sake—take the ladder apart and build it into more chairs for my table. Because that's what my realm is all about.*

*Not ladders. One table—where all are welcome—no climbing necessary.*

Amen.