

Back in the 1300s, a soldier known as the Black Prince was a giant on the English battlefields. But when he got off his horse, he was a shrimp. Likewise with King Henry V, who led English forces some 50 years later: He cast a long shadow as a soldier, but not so long when he was merely a man standing in the sun; he too was a little guy. Actually, for a long time, we've assumed that the Black Prince and Henry V were typical of their peers, that most people from history were shorter than we are. We've based that assumption on things like small doorways found in ancient dwellings and small suits of clothing and armor that are on display in museums.

It turns out, however, that we've been mistaken. According to research conducted by two British archaeologists, Charlotte Roberts and Margaret Cox, the height discrepancy between earlier generations and our own is a tall tale. The two of them came to their conclusion by analyzing skeletons from cemeteries in medieval villages near Yorkshire. Based on their measurements, the average height of men, at least in Britain, has remained about the same over the centuries at about 5'7", and the average height of women has held at about 5'3."

Where they did find some differences was in children. Medieval boys of 10 were about eight inches shorter than 10-year-olds today, but those who survived to adulthood eventually reached normal height. So how do we account for the small clothing the Black Prince and Henry wore? Apparently, they were just runts, below average in size. And all those small suits of armor? That was most likely because many military recruits were drawn from the lower classes, and they were short most likely due to poor nutrition. What's more, a lot of soldiers were boys to begin with. Even the low doorways are easily explained — they were built that way to conserve heat. Thus, we can conclude that most men and women of stature from medieval times were, in general, about as tall as the men and women of our day.

Ok so as we read our Bibles we may wonder, what about the people in Jesus' day? Evidence collected by the same archaeologists suggests that they may have been just as tall. But regardless of their height, short or tall, they were most likely more concerned with other matters of stature, as seen in today's Gospel reading from Mark. In it, Jesus confronts his disciples about their argument over who among them was the tallest — er, the greatest. He makes a statement and then gives an example. The statement was, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and servant of all." And for an example, Jesus calls over a child who lived in that house, takes the child in his arms, and declares, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

Of course, we probably don't have too much trouble understanding his statement, but without knowing something of those times, we may miss altogether the point of the example. In the middle eastern culture of Jesus' day, children were essentially non-persons. They were left with the women, who themselves were considered subservient to the men, but kids were even further down the social ladder. In fact, only slaves were lower in social standing.

And as if to reinforce the insignificance of children, Mark doesn't even identify the gender of the child. The Greek word he uses is *paidion*, which like the English word "child" that it is translated from, is gender neutral. Thus in the NRSV, the account says that Jesus "took a little child and put it among them!" You can't get much more impersonal than "it."

Thus, to say that the followers of Jesus could welcome him by welcoming a child was a mind-blowing suggestion! But Jesus wanted them to understand how God viewed greatness. It came not from being near the top rung of a society's status ladder, but by welcoming those on the bottom rungs, or those who don't have a place on the ladder at all.

“Greatness” is a word based on measurement. The Greek word translated “greatest” in our narrative means “more.” In our usual way of thinking, a person can be designated great, only if he or she excels in some way beyond others or is in one way or another *better* than others. For us to be called great would mean that there are others who do not measure up to our status or achievement, and who are therefore less than we are.

To be clear, Jesus was not taking issue with the idea of measurement to determine greatness; he was simply saying that the disciples were measuring in the wrong direction. True greatness is not found in how far we rise above others in status, or fame, or achievement, but in how far we are willing to go; in including and caring for the least and the lowly in his name. Far from calling for a leveling of humankind, Jesus was urging his followers to stand tall in their recognition of every person — even the most decrepit among us — as someone for whom he came. Thus, in welcoming such a one, they and we welcome Jesus. And in welcoming Jesus, we welcome God.

In our story this morning Jesus ties the word “greatness” to the word “welcome.” Welcoming is an aspect of hospitality, the cordial and generous reception of others as guests. It’s one thing to try to help others from a distance, to throw them our leftovers, or hand-me-downs. But it is quite another to give them the kinds of things we enjoy.

A 10-year-old boy had an opportunity to actually learn a similar lesson. He came home one day from school saying that his class was collecting canned goods to give to the needy, and he wanted to know if he could take some cans from the family’s pantry. His mother told him to help himself, so he started setting out cans of beets, succotash, spinach, anchovies, and even a can of ground corn someone had given the family — all things he didn’t care for himself.

When his mother went over and added SpaghettiOs to the pile, however, he objected. He actually liked SpaghettiOs, and didn't want to part with those. His mother patiently explained to him something about what it means to be hospitable — accepting that the needs of others are as important as our own needs, and it is important for us to learn to give others what we ourselves value.

The Bible occasionally takes note of certain characters' physical height, and in that regard, one man once asked his friend if he knew who the shortest person in the Bible was. The friend guessed Zacchaeus, but the man said no, it was Nehemiah. But a third friend insisted there was an even shorter man; Job's pal Bildad the Shuhite (shoe height). But seriously, folks ... as you may recall the Bible even mentions a race of tall people called Nephilim in the books of Genesis and Numbers, and King Saul was noted as standing "a head and shoulders above everyone else," in 1 Samuel. There was also, as many of us remember from our time in Sunday School, a giant named Goliath, and as I previously mentioned, Zacchaeus, at the other end of the linear scale.

Of course, God is the first to note that size doesn't matter! A person's physical size didn't determine the kind of person the individual was, and the people of biblical times knew that as well as we do today. Still, just as we tend to offer preferential treatment toward beautiful people, so biblical people sometimes subconsciously equated physical stature with certain abilities. Even the great prophet-priest Samuel once had to be reminded to look deeper after his first impression of David, didn't measure up.

You may recall that when God sent Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint a new king from the household of Jesse, Samuel took one look at Jesse's eldest son Eliab, who apparently was tall and striking, and thought, "He must be the one!" But not so, for God told Samuel to pass over Eliab, and said, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the

LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

Well, we know that, of course, and when we actually stop to think about it, we seldom connect a person’s height with his or her character. But people stand tall in other ways. Back in 2006, Dana Reeve, the widow of actor Christopher Reeve, died of lung cancer at the age of 44. Tributes poured in about her. She was an actress and singer in her own right, but the praise was largely for the years of care, support and love she gave to her husband after he was paralyzed from a horseback riding accident, and for her work on behalf of others through the Christopher and Dana Reeve Paralysis Resource Center.

On the one hand, we might think that in caring for her incapacitated husband, she was simply keeping her marriage vows — “for better or worse, in sickness and in health” — but so many people do not keep that promise; the stress and strain of a caregiver’s life can cause some to flee from it. But Dana put her own goals aside to welcome Chris in his new condition. And through the foundation, the couple reached out to welcome others who had been sidelined by injuries or other causes. The sadness at Dana’s death was in part because when someone who stands that tall dies, it leaves a noticeable gap against the sky.

According to research, we now know that our ancestors were, on average, about the same height as our generation. Thanks to certain medical advances, that may not continue to be true for future generations. For example, did you know that back in the early 2000s, the Food and Drug Administration approved the use of injections featuring human growth hormone for healthy children who are simply short. Apparently four years of shots can add an extra three inches to an individual’s final measurement. So the human height average may one day go up a bit, and injections may be the way to get there. But for growing tall spiritually, the prescription remains unchanged. The long and short of it for us, is to be hospitable

toward the least and lowly, for in doing so, we welcome Christ. And in God's eyes that is how we truly stand tall! Amen. Thanks be to God.