

On the Wisdom to Ask Rightly
September 19, 2021, Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Gospel of Mark 9:30-37
Fr. Brad

Why does Jesus use the image of a child? "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

What does Jesus mean by saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all?"

There are two ways of looking at the image of **child** as we reflect on the Gospel today.

First of all let's draw the distinction between *childish* and *childlike*.

Childish evokes the image of immaturity, self-centeredness, 'me first' attitude, insensitivity to consequences for actions and the effect ones actions has on others.

Child-like (which is more in line with what Jesus is referring to) evokes images of innocence, simplicity, a sense of wonder, guiltlessness, vulnerability, and helplessness.

As well, a child-like way usually does not remember injuries, is not jealous, is not concerned about status, is not concerned about political correctness.

In order to relate to children the way God created us to do, we ourselves must become like children. We must become childlike.

For starters, think of the powerlessness as manifested in an infant. Somehow, a helpless infant touches us at a deeper moral place. Vulnerability and helplessness evoke within us a desire to yield to the needs of the child and thus allows us, potentially to transcend our own self-absorption. Taking care of a helpless child can bring out the best in us. An infant carries a quiet moral power. Ask any mother.

This same innocent child-like quiet moral power is manifested in Jesus himself. And that quiet moral power demands **infinite patience** and **a long-term perspective**.

A young child is not threatening. A young child invites the perspective of wonder and awe and innocence that seems to slowly escape our grasp as we get older and more and more involved with the world and its ways.

And so, in welcoming a child in Jesus' name (and this includes welcoming a childlike disposition within ourselves), we welcome Jesus, but also the One who sent Him.

Now we will consider what Jesus meant by, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'

Notice how Jesus is not reprimanding his disciples for striving for greatness, but he explains to them what constitutes **striving for greatness - - being the servant of all**. It is a disposition that eliminates violent competition.

There is such a thing as healthy competition, where we are challenged to use all of the gifts God has given us. We all have an interior need to survive and flourish and healthy competition can bring out the best in us and those around us. However, there is something about us in our human weakness that too often fails to refrain when the healthy competition or accumulation of goods and crosses the line into unhealthy desire - - at the expense of others. **Our desire for basic needs can turn into violent competition for all that we can get.**

True humility lies in understanding that **everything is gift**; everything is **meant to be given back in service of others.**

When each person strives for greatness in this way, there is no competition. It is a good thing to strive to use our gifts for self-improvement, to work at being the best version of ourselves, yet we must be mindful that it is always with the aim of putting it at the service of others.

There is another reason for Jesus using the image of a child to make his point. Children had no status in Jesus' time and were not considered to be persons. They were helpless, vulnerable and unproductive members of society. They cannot be depended upon themselves to look after anybody. Children were last in terms of priority in the society of Jesus' time. There are many 'little ones' (and not just children) who are vulnerable and helpless and need the assistance of others to see them through). The marginalized, that is, the victims of abuse, of racism, those who must navigate through physical and mental disability, the aged, those recovering from addiction. These are widows and orphans of our day.

Jesus puts the child at the center of our attention because of their vulnerability and lack of status in order to make a point. He puts the last first and the last first. Whatever the world has presented as being the greatest: first place (that is productivity, status, money, earthly power) - - Jesus warns of the dangers of making these the most important things.

Our second reading reminds us that we must also be careful to monitor our inner cravings because unbridled, they can lead us to resort to destructive choices and even murder in order to satisfy what our cravings demand. So, do we desire or ask for what we need rightly? Is what we ask for what we truly need for the sake of our betterment and that of others or just the satisfaction of a temporal selfish desire? As James says, *'You do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.'*

The world, without the guidance of a higher moral power (God) ends up corrupting the gifts given for building up and nurturing life and turns life into a competition for earthly goods and earthly power that ultimately divides and kills. Our society has us programmed for achievement, whatever that means and at whatever the cost.

That's why James says, "Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness.'

The beauty and simplicity of the Gospel is clear. No one can become fully human without putting God in first place. Wealth, pride, power are all valued only in relation to

God's love. Children have much to teach us in this regard. **I've yet to meet a 6 year old who would rather rule the world than to just have a friend to play with.**

We need to acknowledge the Giver of the gifts through prayer. The only way to remedy our addictive desires and help us reorder our priorities is to **connect our desires with the desire of God for us.** That is what will provide the peace and true sense of fulfilment for which we were created.

In this Eucharist, as we thank God for the gifts He has given us, we ask that our hearts be opened that we may be healed of our addictive desires. In this way we can then 'ask rightly' for what we truly need. May God answer us in a way that brings true healing.
Amen