

Our Gospel lesson for today comes from Mark and is often read at baptisms ...”let the little children come unto me... of such is the kingdom of God.” Jesus is talking to the chief priests, the religious leaders ... who seemed to be saying that the children were a nuisance, so keep them away. In a story from Matthew, Jesus is talking with the disciples (who were asking who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and he replies: “Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become *like children*, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4) We know that children have a lot to learn, and that self-centeredness is the natural way we all start life, but let’s be clear that Jesus is certainly not advising us to become *child-ish*, but to become *child-like*, like one who is humble and open to learning, open to what life can teach.

Jesus is teaching the *adults* something, about the special gifts of young children that often are lost or squashed as we age. Who is not mesmerized by the spontaneous giggling and laughing of young children? We wish we could laugh as easily! And who is not moved with some compassion when a young child bursts into tears? Tears and laughter... the emotional world of a child is so evident, so readily accessible! And they are able to move on rather quickly, able to shift gears to new emotional realities. We *wish* we could move on, especially from tears. For too many adults, both tears and laughter become covered over, or perhaps we get stuck in one mode, like depression. When adults are stone-faced, almost emotionless, we wonder, when was the last time so and so had a good cry, or a good laugh? Yes... we could also think about anger... when was the

last time you got angry, standing up for yourself... spiritual communities call this “righteous anger:” a focused, controlled kind of anger (versus destructive raging anger). Sometimes all emotions are repressed; we get the idea that gusty laughter is too loud for those around, or that tears are shameful (hold them back! ) and that anger will become uncontrollable and violent. From young children we learn or remember the place of honest emotions.

We’ve mentioned children’s ability and openness to learn new things, How sad when some adults fall into the category of “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” Or even more sad is being around adults who act like “know-it-alls.” (Of course this can start even in the teen years... Remember Mark Twain’s comment about when he was 14 he knew so much more than his Dad, but when he turned 21 he was surprised how much his Dad had learned in 7 years!)

And how about the spirit of adventure in children? Yes, even with older failing bodies, there is a sense in which all of life can be an adventure, and we surely can “learn something new every day!” I love Ken Medema’s lyrics in his song called Ocean Beach... that when he was young, he loved to run along the beach and dive into the waves... and now that he is older, he may walk or run more cautiously, but he knows there are always new waves to dive into, new reasons to sieze each new day. (Carpe Diem). Children don’t need to be told “Carpe Diem” ... They Carpe every Diem and fill it to the brim with adventures and learnings!

So Jesus had no trouble telling the temple leaders, “Let the children come to me,” they are not a bother at all; you rigid stuck-in-your-ways adults could learn a few things from *them!*

Many thinkers and spiritual writers have spoken about a “second naivete,” a term originally suggested by a frenchman, Paul Ricoer. Richard Rohr tells about his own life story, the Catholic upbringing, the seminary, the advanced studies... and then in older adult years, admitting that he would keep falling, but learn to fall “upward,” into the grace of God... learn to trust the Great I AM. He insists that mystics and saints in all faiths learn to accept that we do not know everything and never will. I spoke last week about the humble and helpful attitude of “I don’t know.” The “first naivete” is of course our young childhood days, where we are indeed innocent and ignorant about so many things. As we grow, we enjoy all kinds of learning and critical thinking, even graduate study in science and philosophy, and we question just about everything, but in our older years it seems natural to return to a second naivete, a from of innocence or trust, especially in a Great God, a Great Spirit, by whatever name, at least a trust in Goodness and Mercy available always in this life!

Many speak of older years as a “second childhood,” since most all of us will enter a stage of greater dependence, depending on the help of family and friends. Life experience says we are wise to accept help from others, for the many daily necessary chores, like driving, or house cleaning, or food shopping and preparation. Jesus even teaches us about aging in a lesser known, not-too-popular verse in the last chapter of the Gospel according to John: “Truly truly I say to you, when you were young, you

clothed yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will clothe you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” Jesus knew about elders who are homebound, frail, and weak. Physical and mental limitations are the realities of childhood *and* old age. Yet in the middle of life, we can also accept that we have physical and mental limitations, and live in the humility of interdependence, knowing that we need community, that we need helpers along our journey of life. This is childlike trust. We remember that Jesus also said: “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.” The implication is that not only do we humbly seek help from family and friends, but that we humbly seek our higher power, God, that we pray regularly with hope and faith. The fact that children are so open and transparent with their emotions suggests that we could also entrust our emotions, our laughter and tears to a good God.

Humility and Openness, the way of a young child, is the only way to learn and grow in this life, whether we are talking about earthly skills, or spiritual growth. This is also the Way of our Savior who learned and grew his entire life, and he advised us to do the same, to follow him, to have a childlike openness and trust in our God, our Creator and Redeemer.

I know you’ll recognize this song, a song about trust... trust in a God of Love, ... that God’s essence is indeed Love, that Love is all around us, before us, behind us, within us... that we just have to stay open, to water every seed of love, so that love will grow like a flower. Think of the last time you sent or received a flower; it’s a symbol of LOVE... (I sing “The Rose”).