

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Aug 12th 2014

"Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?"

Oh, how difficult it is to read this gospel today, in the aftermath of the sexual abuse scandals in the Church in the U.S., in light of the data that says 80% or more of child sexual abuse happens in families, reeling from the kidnapping stories in our headlines, shocked by daily images of innocent children blown up in senseless violence.

He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said,

"Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven.

Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven."

With so many painful reminders of how vulnerable innocent children are, it is no wonder that we resist being like little children. What was Jesus getting at? Why does he want us to become like children? What is there in "humility" that places this kind of disciple of Jesus in the highest place in the Kingdom of heaven?

A number of years ago a dear friend of mine taught me something I had never heard before. She said she believed that we were mistaken to think of children as "blank slates" religiously. It is unfortunate, she said, that we think we have to teach children primitive religious beliefs for many years before they can learn deeper things. She thought it was sad that we sometimes think that it is only very mature adults who reach great spiritual "heights." She believed that children have very deep, profound faith, and a great capacity for intimacy, tenderness, trust, compassion, awe and reverence. She explained to me her sense that, as children, we are taught not to trust, and that our spontaneous sense of wonder and awe is eroded, as we are introduced to the "adult" world. Eventually, as we grow through life's experiences, we become less innocent, less able to be intimate, less able to be religious freely and spontaneously.

In many ways, this theory fits my experience and the words of Jesus. It is a journey to return to innocence, to return to a sense of awe and wonder. It is a struggle for us to trust and surrender our defenses. We've become "street smart." I can remember the first time I heard the phrase on the playground, "Nice guys finish last." We have been wounded by times in the past that we trusted and

were hurt. We have become more critical readers of our world, are often skillful diagnosticians of what is wrong with others. We have studied theology, and know lots more about the scriptures. Our priests and bishops and lay religious leaders seem so much more "human."

How do we "turn and become like children"? First of all, I think we see how far we have strayed from innocence and vulnerability. I think Jesus' invitation is a wonderful grace to stir our desire for a freer spirit. What about our fears? It really is "dangerous" to be more child-like. As we see so dramatically, children can be taken advantage of. Jesus is inviting us to place our lives in the reign of God. He is inviting us to rely on God and to experience the humble dependence that we find in that place.

And what can we do to make it more possible for one another to experience this type of spiritual depth? "And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me." We can receive one another, in our poverty, simplicity, transparency. It will be easier for us all, and we will be receiving our hearts' deepest desire.

Andy Alexander, S.J. - Creighton University