

14th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (July 9, 2023)

Such a beautiful and consoling gospel we just heard—Jesus praying in praise and gratitude to his heavenly Father and inviting us to come to him. This passage is often heard at funerals, and it's easy to see why: Jesus promises that those who come to him will find rest in him. And that, after all, is why he became one of us in the first place.

I'd like to focus for a moment on part of the first part of this reading where Jesus praises the Father for revealing his truth and love not so much to 'the wise and the learned' but instead to 'little ones.' Other translations use words like 'infants', 'babes', and 'children.' Does this mean that the Father is concerned only for the youngest in age among us and not us older folks? Of course not. The 'little ones' Jesus speaks of here are the humble—those who know that God is God and they are not. The 'little ones' know that they are not completely self-sufficient, they are not in control, and they know that they have to depend on others. Jesus was speaking his praise of the little ones here in contrast to the attitude of some of the scribes and Pharisees who thought they knew it all and thus looked down their noses in disdain at others.

The 'littlest' and the youngest among us certainly know they need others, especially Mom and Dad. Infants need to be fed, clothed and bathed. Toddlers need help tying their shoes and with many other basic tasks, and they are not at all afraid or hesitant to ask for help—even if they occasionally say "I can do it myself!" (when it's perfectly obvious that they can't...). Our grade-, middle- and high-schoolers can take care of an increasing number of their personal needs but are not yet financially independent—and so they are not afraid to ask 'will you please buy this for me?' And even we adults are dependent on others who have so many necessary skills and talents that we don't have. I, for one, am more than grateful for the doctors and others who did my surgery back in January; I surely could not have done that by myself...

In other words, every single one of us is a 'little one'—whether we acknowledge that fact or not. None of us are completely self-sufficient; we all depend on others in many ways and to many degrees. And this dependence of ours is most clearly the case when it comes to who and what we are as children of God and our hope for the eternal joy that our loving God desires for us. Jesus is calling and reminding all of us to be 'little ones' in this sense, no matter what age and stage of life we have come to.

Sometimes we are forced to face the reality of our complete dependence on the grace and the love of God—when life will throw the unexpected curve ball at us and leave us wondering 'where did that come from, and what do I do now?' I told you before about the time back in 1984 before I began my seminary studies when I suddenly began to struggle with serious questions and doubts about faith and about God himself. I won't repeat that whole story, but the bottom line: God allowed me to experience that darkness in order to make me realize that I wasn't going to resolve those doubts on my own—I needed to rely first and foremost on the power of his grace and the reality of his merciful love. It was the most painful experience I've ever had, but I am truly grateful to God for helping me to learn this most important lesson.

I recently came across another real-life story illustrating this basic lesson. In the current issue of *Magnificat*, Kimberly Shankman—on the faculty of Benedictine College in Kansas—tells her story of learning the real meaning of control. She writes:

“I always defined freedom as being in control. When my son was horrifically injured in a car crash, I learned better. As the surgeons worked desperately to save his life, I knew I was helpless to do anything other than beg God for his mercy...As my son’s journey continued, it became clear that his disabilities were permanent. He would never be able to care for himself. Then, I saw clearly that freedom was not the strength to do what I wanted and overcome obstacles on my own; instead, it was fully embracing my weakness, knowing that my only protection, the only thing to rely on, is God’s love. And that’s enough. More than enough. My husband and I care for our son; we don’t have freedom to spontaneously go out to dinner, or to sleep in on Saturdays. But we do have the much more important freedom to beg God for what we need. He always answers. He surrounds us with love and wonderful friends, neighbors, and caregivers who bring us his help.”

I’m guessing that most of us can understand what Kimberly is saying here. As she tells her story of learning more deeply what it means to be one of those ‘little ones’ that Jesus spoke of, I’m guessing we can all nod our heads and think to ourselves: “yes, I know what she means”. The details, of course, will vary from person to person and from family to family, but at some point we have or will come to realize that ‘I am not in control.’ The urgent question then presents itself: how do I personally respond to the uncomfortable and inconvenient truth that I am in fact not in full control?

Some refuse to accept that reality, and may only grow in resentment, bitterness and anger against God and everyone else. If you know someone in that situation, please pray for them that may come to know the peace that comes only from giving up the illusion of being fully in charge. Pray that they come to rely instead on that most amazing and healing power of the cross of Jesus Christ. Remember his invitation, both gentle and challenging, from today’s gospel: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves.” No better advice can be given, no more powerful solution is possible. May God grant us all the grace and desire to be those ‘little ones’ who know and trust in the power and desire of God to embrace us in the fullness of his merciful love and truth.