

Third Sunday of Easter

Year
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Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41
Ps 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11-12, 13
Rv 5:11-14
Jn 21:1-19

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Jesus is famous for telling his disciples, “Unless you become like little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (Matt 18:3) But what does that mean? How does a person become like a child again? Surely, Jesus does not mean we must become physically small and chronologically young, since that’s impossible. In John’s gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus that we must be born again, but he doesn’t mean that we must come forth from our mother’s womb once more. Becoming like a child is not about size or age.

Perhaps it means that one must become as sweet and innocent as a child again? Only someone without children would think that’s what Jesus means. Most parents of my acquaintance find it hard to stop laughing when people talk about how innocent children are. As a child, I often wondered what my mother meant when she said my brothers and sister and I would be the death of her. Now, as I watch my own family, I understand. My nieces and nephews are very sweet, and awfully good, but the simple fact is that they are also con artists. After a few early mistakes, I learned that when a niece or nephew asks me for anything, I have to check with the nearest parent to see if it’s okay, because these kids are clever. From the moment I walk in the door, they are working me. Matthew will yell out, “All right! Uncle Fran’s here!” as if I were his best friend and we hadn’t seen each other in years. Katie will give me a hug and a kiss, and Bernadette will pull me over to whatever game or drawing she is working on, so I can admire her work. Soon, one of them is whispering in my ear, “Can I have a cookie?” And before long, without even realizing it, I am handing over a whole package of Oreos, and my sister is asking me how someone supposedly so smart can give three small children what is in essence a bag of sugar, thirty minutes before their bedtime.

My nieces and nephews aren’t malicious, but they are not exactly innocent, either.

So if becoming a child is not about size or age or innocence, what is it about? It’s something even harder. It’s helplessness. It’s dependence. In today’s gospel, the risen Jesus says to Peter, “Now you go where you like, you do what you want, you are in control. You are young enough that you can go fishing at night with your friends when you want to; you are strong enough that you can swim from the ship to the shore, and by yourself lift a full net of fish. But now the time has come for all that to change.”

Listen again to how Jesus describes that change: “Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus is describing what it is to be a child. We lift up our arms as Mom or Dad pulls a

sweater down on us, brushes our hair and ties our shoes. They hold our hand and led us to places we did not want to go: school, church, the doctor's office or the dentist's chair. When we are children, someone else is in charge, decides what we wear and where we go. Childhood is a time of deep dependence on others: for safety and protection, for care and love, for life itself. Children can not make it on their own.

Jesus says to Peter, "That is where you are headed again. If you continue to follow me, you will become like a child again. Other people will decide where you live, and it will be in prison. Other people will decide what you wear, and it will be rags. Other people will decide what happens to you, and it will be death. And in that cell and under those chains and on that cross, you will have no one to turn to but me. And I will not abandon you." That is the path Jesus lays out for Peter. He will become like a child again, but the ones who make the decisions will not love him, the ones who lead him will not care for him, and the place he is taken will not be safe. When that happens, Peter will be helpless. Peter will not be able to make it on his own. And Christ will be there.

Peter accepts this path. He becomes like a child again. As we hear in the Acts of the Apostles, he fearlessly proclaims the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The result is "the captain and the court officers had brought the apostles in and made them stand before the Sanhedrin." Peter does not choose to go to court, he is lead there. He does not decide to stand before the Sanhedrin, he is forced. Because Peter has heard the call and turned his life over to Christ, because he obeys God rather than men, he is ordered about, given no choice, forced to come and go and the will of another. Peter is sent to prison. Peter is made to suffer. Peter has his life taken from him.

But there is the wonder of being a disciple, the marvel we celebrate this Easter, the good news of life rising out of cross and grave. Peter will be weak as a child, led by others, given no choice, unable to protect himself from punishment and prison. But Peter will be strong as a child of God: dependent on Christ and so utterly free, obeying God instead of men and so living beyond prison walls, suffering yet saved because what matters most is beyond the reach of his enemies. Peter dies to himself to live in Christ. He gives himself away, and so receives himself back, loses his life and so saves it, just as the Lord promised.

When Jesus says that we must become like children again, he is not offering a sentimental vision of innocence, of going back to the carefree days of childhood. He is saying something harsh. He is asking us to remember what it was to be a child, to have no control, to live at the direction and insistence of others, to be so dependent that we could not survive on our own. Weren't we all glad to leave that behind, to take control, to make decisions for ourselves? Christ says: "As a child, you had to live that way. Now, choose to live that way. Choose to be dependent, ask to be weak, freely hand your lives over to me."

Unlike Peter, arrest, imprisonment and execution do not await us; but like Peter, sin, loneliness, and loss will come. We fail, we sin, our bodies weaken and our minds grow slow, and as we face a hard future we are borne back ceaselessly into the past on waves of regret and loss. And for some there does come a time when others must dress them and feed them and lead them. Today, Jesus tells us that being his disciples will not keep us from these sorrows, will not save us from weakness and age, will not spare us the wounds of sin and loss. But if we become like children again, if we turn our lives over to Christ, if we obey God rather than men, if we say and mean, "Not my will, but yours be done," then suffering wounds but does not destroy us, sickness ravages but does not ruin us, sin and loss weigh us down but will not break us. Christ handed over

his spirit to the Father, and thus was death destroyed. When we hand our lives over to Christ, every hardship and grief that comes to us comes to God as well, and He is our help, stronger than flesh, deeper than blood.

In today's gospel, Jesus calls from the shore to the apostles, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They hadn't caught a thing. On their own, after a whole night of fishing, these professional fishermen had nothing to show for their hard work. Jesus says, "Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something." They obey his command, and receive in an instant what all their hard work did not win. At this Mass, Christ asks us the same. "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" Have we found any food that really satisfies, any pleasure which does not fade, any gift or hope or trust which can last in the face of death?

Christ says, "Take this, my body. Take this, my blood." We have to take it. We can't make it on our own, we can't catch it, we can't earn it. We must receive it. We must stretch out our hands, and take what he alone can give. And when we do, then like children called around the dinner table, we are young again. Like the lepers and the lame, like the blind and the crippled, like the sinner and the suffering, we fall before Christ and receive his Spirit. That makes us true children of the Father.