

BIBLE READING: Mark 9: 30-37

SERMON

When was the last time you cared for a child? What happened?

Children are the most precious people in the world. They encourage us when the world wears us down. They freshen us when our aching joints tell us our true age. They challenge us to the Godlike virtues of patience, self-discipline, and charity. In spite of our mature "wisdom," children even help us to see the world in new and wonderful ways.

Yet, isn't it so easy to sweep children, their concerns, their needs, even their very presence, out of view? Isn't it so easy to let our needs, agendas, and self-importance overshadow those of our small brothers and sisters in faith? As much as they brighten our world, isn't it so easy to ignore children?

Jesus used a small child as a benchmark of leadership. For, whoever welcomed one like a child welcomed Christ himself.

Jesus taught his followers the true meaning of leadership. Leadership doesn't mean power but service. Power strangles life and brings a slow death. But, service brings life, even from death itself. The measure of servant leadership lies not with adults, but with children.

To emphasize Jesus' vision of leadership, he gives them the example of serving a child. Unlike our society, children were the least important people in ancient cultures; children had the status of slaves. People had children to serve them and provide financial security in their elderly years. And they had many children, because the mortality rate for children under 16 years of age was 50 percent. Childhood was a precarious time in the ancient world.

To serve someone as lowly as a child took an act of extreme humility. Unlike our Western societies that honor and esteem children, ancient societies honored the elderly in one's clan. Reflecting this outlook, St. Thomas Aquinas once answered the question, "If there was a fire, whom should I rescue first?" Thomas listed in the order of importance: one's parents first, one's spouse second, one's children last of all. Children were the least important. Serving one such as a child really showed true leadership for they served the ignored and the helpless.

But who was the "child" of which Jesus spoke? Who was the Christian to serve? In one respect, the Christian was to show hospitality to those who had the social status of the child: the outcast, the sinner, the sick and feeble. In another respect, the Christian was to show hospitality to all of God's children, regardless if they were friend or foe.

In fact it is here that Jesus actually starts calling his disciples "little children," the "little ones," or better yet, "the poor little ones" – "anawim". The "anawim" was a class of people in Biblical times, the permanent poor.

Obviously it took wisdom to discern how one would serve these different groups. But Jesus made one thing clear. Leadership meant serving all. It meant honouring the least important.

To serve one like children, to place all others on the same plane as oneself, is the road to Christ and the Father. This service is exemplified with Christ's death on the cross.

Christ's example of leadership requires us to reflect on our motivation for power. Throughout Galilee, Jesus preached about the "reign of God," a state where God would live with the poor, the lowly, and the sinner. Everyone was invited to live under God's reign, but God's reign required a change of mind and heart to His will and away from the desires for more power.

We all have the opportunity and the responsibility to exercise leadership in our lives. But, as the gospel points out, leadership means service. It means setting aside our selfish desires to care for others' needs and to show them respect.

Which reminds me of a story.

Once upon a time there was a Squire who longed to be a knight. He wanted to serve his king and be the most honourable and noble knight who ever lived. At his knighting he was so overcome by dedication that he made a special oath. He vowed to bow his knees and lift his arms in homage to his king and him alone. This knight was given the task of guarding a city on the frontier of the kingdom. Every day he stood at attention by the gate of the city in full armour.

Years passed. One day as he was standing at attention guarding his post a peasant woman passed by with goods for the market. Her cart turned over, spilling potatoes and carrots and onions everywhere. The woman hurried to get them all back in her cart. But the knight wouldn't help the poor woman. He just stood at attention lest he break his vow by bending his knees to help pick up the woman's goods.

Time passed and one day a man with one leg was passing by and his crutch broke. "Good knight, sir, reach down and help me up." But the knight would not stoop or lift a hand to help lest he break his vow.

Years and decades passed, the knight was getting old. One day his grandson came by and said, "Grandpa pick me up and take me to the fair." But he would not stoop lest he break his vow to the king

Finally after many, many, years the king came to visit and inspect the knight. As the king approached the knight just stood there at attention. The king inspected him as he stood there, but then he noticed that the knight was crying. You are one of the noblest knights I have ever seen. Why do you cry? Your majesty, I took a vow that I would bow and lift my arms in homage to you but I am unable to keep my vow. These years have done their work and the joint of my armour are rusted. I cannot lift my arms or bend my knees.

With the loving voice of a parent the King replied, "Perhaps if you had knelt to help all those who passed by, and lifted your arms to embrace all those who came to you, you would have been able to keep your vow to pay me homage today."