Twenty-Fifth Sunday of the Year, Cycle B

St. Mary’s Riverside, 2021

While I understand that the prophetic word of God

 Is not designed to predict the future

 I could not help but wonder

 As I pondered this passage

In which Jesus overhears his disciples

 Arguing about which of them was the greatest

 If God had anticipated the 21st century political scene in the U.S.

 In which incumbents and upstart candidates for office

 Do what they can to impress upon audiences of every stripe

 How they are the greatest among their peers

 And the messianic answer to what of sounds like

 the imminent demise of our country without them.

It is a struggle as old as humankind

 The struggle to be number one ... to be on top

 To calculate one’s worth

 But too often through the perceived inferiority of others.

 And the hidden danger in this race to the top

 At the expense of another’s reputation or dignity

 Is not only a potential for pride or self-righteousness

 but something more insidious, more destructive

 As pointedly noted in today’s second reading.

It is not very often that we find a clear correlation

 Between the gospel and the second reading.

 The first reading is explicitly chosen to correspond to the gospel:

 So today’s first reading from Wisdom

 Echoes Jesus’ prediction of his suffering and death

 The second reading is a semi-continuous reading

 From one of the epistles.

 For 4 weeks now we have been reading from James’ letter.

 Happily there is convergence between Mark and James today,

 Almost as if James is commenting on this apostolic squabble.

 And James’ warning

 in light of the gospel spat over who’s the greatest

 is not the onset of narcissism or self-absorption

 but the specter of war

 the abandonment of mercy

 the demise of peace

 and the onset of violence.

Recently I listened to Eric Metaxas’

riveting biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

 Subtitled: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy[[1]](#endnote-1)

 It is a fascinating examination,

of a remarkable young Lutheran Pastor

deeply devoted to traditional German culture

and willing to sacrifice his life to save his country.

It is also a heart wrenching exposé

Of the fallacious myth of a superior race

And the horrific tragedies that resulted from such arrogance.

 James wrote: “where jealousy and selfish ambition exist,

 There is disorder and every foul practice.”

 This not only defines the Nazi regime of a distant past

 But also the disorder and foulness

That yet abounds in today’s world

 As the lives of the innocent in war ravaged countries

As well as on the streets of our cities

 are persistently cheapened and discarded.

And what does Jesus propose in the face of this race to the top

 With its potential for violence and the oppression of the innocent?

 When a child has wandered into the midst of his inner circle,

 ever the extemporaneous teacher

 Jesus wraps his arms around the kid

 And informs the burly fishermen

 The so-called adults in the group

 That if they have a future with him ...

 Their future is to be found in their past ... in their childhood.

Placing childhood at the center of discipleship

 Is at least disconcerting, if not problematic

 While I am sure that most of you were perfect children

 Childhood seems an odd symbol of Christian discipleship

 Since children are by nature self-centered

 believing the world revolves around their wants & needs.

 I remember months after the birth of the first nephew

 My sleep deprived and exhausted sister

 Announced that her child was a terrorist

 And she was captive to his will.

 Like many offspring, human children are naturally selfish

 A biological drive imbedded in their DNA

To increase their chances of survival.

They are also prone to violence if deprived of what they want:

 just put 2 three-year old boys in a room

 with 1 red truck and see how long before struggle ensues.

Maybe, however, it is not childishness that Jesus is offering

 As his gospel strategy for discipleship

 And the eradication of all rivalry from his inner circle

 But maybe it is the child likeness Jesus himself exhibits

 Those treasured traits of childhood

 That have been squeezed out of us

 By education, and competition, and prejudice:

like the innocence that disinclines them

 From judging people by the color of their skin

 The size of their bank account

 Or the crowd of facial wrinkles;

 like their ability to live in the moment

 uncomprehending how many months to Christmas

 Or weeks to their birthday

 Or how long to drive to grandma’s house:

 So the 5-year-old, prepared to make a 3-hour trip

with his parents to see relatives.

 In the back seat he surrounded by coloring books

 Mom’s iPod, snacks and juice boxes.

 five minutes into the journey he begins to ask

 “are we there yet”

 A persistent inquiry

 Until the father explodes and tells him if he asks again

 He is going to be punished.

 There is an extended moment of quiet,

 Until this small voice from the back seat asks

 “will I still be five when we get there”?

 It’s also their gift of wonder,

 The ability to be entertained by a balloon

 Or the simplest of peek-a-boo games

 Often more captivated by the wrapping paper or box

 than the expensive gift waiting inside.

 Then there’s that natural skin hunger

Their instinctive relationality

 desiring to be touched, stroked, rocked and held.

 And maybe most of all it is their wanton neediness

 Their inability to do virtually anything for themselves

 Whether acquiring food and seeking shelter.

 The truth about children is that they have no product

 Or worth other than themselves

 A worth God deems as incalculable.

That was more true in Jesus’ time than in our own.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Western cultures tend to place children first

With the instinct to risk everything to save the child.

Yet ancient Middle Eastern cultures would place the child last.

Even Thomas Aquinas taught that in a raging fire

a husband was obliged to save his father first

then his mother, next his wife, and last his child.

When famine arose children would be fed last after the adults
Within the family the child had next to no status

and was considered equal to a slave

they were not always doted upon as prized possessions

which is maybe why a child seems to aimlessly wander

into Jesus’ company

unattended, unsupervised, undervalued.

Children in the culture that shaped the disciples' worldview

weren't the only ones who were devalued;

they shared space on the margins with many others:

the disabled, the sick, widows, and the unclean.

When Jesus challenges his adult compatriots to be like children

he effectively insults them

disparages their physical and social status

 and illustrates that, as one blogger put it,

the greatest among them was

"*twenty-six inches tall, with limited vocabulary, no job, zero net worth, a nobody. And God's chosen agent."*

And what is the upshot of this messianic lesson

 this apostolic comeuppance,

 this dressing down of discipleship,

 this ascendancy of a child in God’s emerging reign?

Simply put there is no one whom we may safely ignore

 For they in truth may be God’s messenger

 Especially in their wanton need.

 And recognizing their innate dignity

 Their ability to reflect the very countenance of God

 Is the first and final antidote to violence

 a true step on what our second reading describes

 As the road to peace.

We cannot return to our childhood,

 Nor does the gospel call us to do so.

 Actually, part of taking up our cross and following Christ

 Is recognizing something of the sadness of growing up

 With all of its challenges and burdens.

 The poet Billy Collins captures some of this poignancy

In his eloquent reflection about turning 10 years old,

He writes:

*The whole idea of it makes me feel
like I'm coming down with something,
something worse than any stomach ache
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light--
a kind of measles of the spirit,
a mumps of the psyche,
a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
but that is because you have forgotten
the perfect simplicity of being one
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I could shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

It is true: there is some sadness in leaving behind

Those Peter Pan instincts and having to grow up,

 which requires us to admit the possibility of a cross in our present

 Or certainly in our future

 And the recognition that when we fall, we do unfortunately bleed.

 But in the demanding gift of an adult faith

there is also the grace

 to see every child of God as though

 there is nothing under their skin but light

 and to embolden them to shine,

to treasure their radiance and affirm their dignity.

In doing so we pray that we too

will recover some of that child-like luminosity

 and so reaffirm our own identity as children of God

 commissioned to radiate the light imparted to us in baptism

 That still courses through our being

 For we too are children of the light

 Sister and brothers of the eternal luminosity

revealed in the eternal Christ, Lord and God, forever and ever.

1. Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. What follows is reliant upon John Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday: Cycle B.* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 139-141. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Billy Collins, “On Turning Ten,” from *The Art of Drowning* (Pittsburgh – London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 48-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)