

**Fr. Keith Boisvert**  
**23 September 2018**  
**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

An ex-convict, who had recently returned from four years in prison, was speaking to an assembly of students. The thrust of his message was to dissuade them from ending up where he did. Much of what he said was predictable. He told stories of violence, boredom, and loneliness—all of the things one would expect a prison to be. But he made one point that no one had anticipated-- and it seemed to strike home. He described prison as a “*world without children,*” and spoke of what it was like to go four years without ever seeing a child, or anything belonging to a child. He never saw a toy. He never heard a little girl’s squeal of delight. He never heard a little boy’s laughter. He indicated that one of the things he missed most in prison was the presence of children.

I wouldn’t have thought of that. Ordinarily, we think of children as needing us. But this ex-con was saying that we also need them—and that is probably truer than we realize. They are so much a part of our world that we tend to take them for granted. Sometimes we are bothered by children—people tell me it even happens here in church sometimes! But their very presence helps to keep life in balance. Just the sight of a child can remind us of some vital things that we tend to forget.

The Gospel reading we just heard indicates Jesus understood this quite clearly. It tells of a day when he needed to call his disciples back to the real world, to turn their thoughts from trivialities to things that really matter. These apostles, whom you and I are supposed to look up to as saints, had been involved in an argument about which of them was the most important. Think of that. Twelve grown men, the closest associates of Jesus, apostles, pillars of the early Christian community—and there they were, bickering about their relative importance. Jesus responded to this by giving them a one-sentence summation of what “importance” really means, and how to achieve it: “*If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all, and the servant of all.*” Then he did an unpredictable thing. He took a little child, stood the child in the middle of his disciples, put his arms around the child, and said: “*Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me, but the One who sent me*”.

Jesus had a lot of wisdom, and he was a good teacher. While lesser men were nursing their egos, he was seated on the floor with his arms around a little child. Instead of lecturing them about their silliness, he told them to make room in their lives for children. That concrete image had more

impact than any sermon he could have preached. Anyone who has children of their own already knows this: children have a way of putting life in perspective.

Can you imagine trying to impress children with the credentials we use to impress each other? Younger children really don't care about our college degrees, or where we got them, or that we happened to finish in the top 10% of our class. They do not care about our professional honors, or the position we hold. The children attending *Kate's Kids!* down the hallway right now are not interested in the kind of car we drive, or where we live, or how much money we have in the bank.

A little boy is not greatly concerned with whether his father is president of the company. What concerns him most is whether his father is a vital part of the home, and whether he has time to play a game or read a book. A little girl may be pleased that her mother is beautiful, but that really doesn't matter unless her mother is also gentle, kind, and patient. What children want to know is whether we are warm, and real, and approachable, and loving. Do we know how to smile with our eyes? Can they believe in us? Can they depend on us? Will we accept them or reject them? Will we be there to help them when they need help—or will we use them or hurt them? This is why the sin of child abuse, sexual and otherwise, is so egregious, and why it often causes such long-term negative physical, psychological and spiritual effects that people sometimes never overcome. That this happened in connection with the clergy is unconscionable.

Of course, children are incredibly naïve. Their judgement on most matters is not to be trusted. They still have a lot of learning and maturing to do. But sometimes, in some areas, their feel for life is better than ours. All of our arrogance of achievement or pride of position leaves them very unimpressed. For them, the key word is love. When all is said and done, that is the most important thing—until they get older and learn other priorities from us by our unfortunate example. So we should all make special effort to make room for children in our lives. Their very presence helps to balance pride, and bring us a little closer to God, because they teach us humility.

You may have seen the old movie entitled "*The Russians are Coming, the Russians are Coming!*". The story revolves around a Russian submarine that had some kind of mechanical problem. It was forced to surface and dock at a small American fishing village. The people of the village and the sailors on the sub were both afraid of each other. As the movie draws to a close, there is a tense scene at dockside. The crew and the villagers stood facing each other with guns in hand. A confrontation seemed inevitable. But just then, the tension was broken by a cry for help.

A young boy, wanting a better view of the event, had climbed to the top of a church steeple. A railing broke and left him dangling fifty or sixty feet in the air. A fall from that height would surely kill him... Suddenly, national and political differences were forgotten. All of the people put down their guns, and Americans and Russians worked side-by-side to save the boy. Their efforts succeeded, and the story ended happily.

It was only a movie—just make-believe. But it raises a good possibility: *why couldn't it be reality?* Wouldn't it really make sense for all people to do that? Perhaps we could, if we would stop nursing our little egos, and commit ourselves to saving children around the world. The children in Iraq and Afghanistan do not need guns and bullets. They need food and shelter and schools and playgrounds. Israeli and Palestinian children, more than anything else, need adults to put their arms around them, just as Jesus did with that little child in that very area. It is reported that the African group Boko Haram used 203 children as suicide bombers in Nigeria and Cameroon in 2017. At least 19,000 soldier children are participating in the conflict in South Sudan, and there is a spike in child recruitment being seen in the Middle East.

How about American children? The most recent statistics for the State of Maryland I could find were for 2015, when there were almost 7,000 investigated and confirmed victims of child abuse or neglect. Of these, 60% were neglected, 23% were physically abused, and 24% were sexually abused. These are horrible numbers to contemplate, because this means that around 1,700 children were sexually abused in Maryland in one year. It is an interesting comparison with the 1,000 cases of clergy sexual abuse reported in parts of Pennsylvania, but over seventy years. This means that the church statistics, while startling, are only revealing the tip of the iceberg of a very serious societal problem.

Jesus knew what he was doing. Put a child at the center of life, and all of our attempts to feel important look as silly as they are. I am saddened by the number of younger married couples who are now saying that they don't want to have children. Having just buried my mother in July, I know personally just how profound that kind of relationship is. The truth of the matter is that we have no real importance except in the eyes of the God who loves us, and in the lives of the people who need us. If we miss those two points in life, then everything else is pretty much a total loss. So put a welcome mat at the front door of your heart. Make room in your life for those who need you. Then

you will not be worried about importance—that won't matter anymore. But to someone, or to several someones, you may well become the most important person in the world.