

Reflection for 22-23 September 2018
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Mike Britton

Text: Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; Psalm 54:3-4, 5, 6, 8; James 3:16-4:3; Mark 9:30-37.

Jesus places a child amid the disciples. When I was preparing this reflection last month, it was hard for me to read this, as just last month we were confronted with yet another report of clerical abuse of children and an organized cover-up in our church. Father Richard's and Pope Francis' letters printed in last month's *New Spirit* call us to root out clericalism in ourselves and in our institution, since it is a key element of what let this evil go unexposed and unaddressed for so long.

Clericalism, according to Merriam-Webster, is "a policy of maintaining or increasing the power of a religious hierarchy."¹ It's not a new phenomenon, nor is it unique to our faith community. We put people onto pedestals so easily, but Holy Orders, like every other Sacrament, is no guarantee against sin. Like engineers like myself, doctors, politicians, executives, spouses, and parents, priests and bishops are human, and fallible.

There's a difference between aspirations and expectations. We all hope not to make mistakes, but when we expect perfection, and make our love and respect conditional on it, we set the stage for deceit. When we accept the pedestal of those expectations, we find ourselves tempted to hide our failings so as not to lose that respect and be shunned as inadequate by the disappointed admirers. This is the trap from which we, as a faith community, have to extricate ourselves.

The disciples argued over who among them was the greatest. Jesus doesn't tell them not to want to be great, but tells them—twice—what it entails. It doesn't mean accepting the place of honor and being lauded by all. Before they set out, he tells them what he, as their leader and teacher, will do as the greatest of us all: he will accept death, in a way that seems to throw aside his personal honor. They don't understand, of course, so he tells them again: the child he puts among them is, in their society, a person of no consequence, from whom they stand to gain no honor or advantage. Welcoming the child is

a recognition of the equality of us all, and a sign of the all-embracing love of God. Honor and status in human society creates divisions between those on the pedestal and those who are to look up to them; Jesus comes to make us one. Jesus wants us all to be the greatest givers and receivers of love we can possibly be.

When we realize that love—God’s and ours—is not a scarce resource we have to fight over, but an abundance that multiplies like grain planted, harvested, and planted again, we can begin to let go of the fear of being rejected. Perhaps the ungodly in the first reading want to bring down the righteous person because they fear that so long as anyone is better than they are, they will be condemned, and it seems so far to go to become good. If only our lives could show that it’s not a contest, and that whatever they have done, they can do the right thing in their next breath and be reborn into God if they choose. Whatever we have done, if we turn to God and ask humbly for blessings for the sake of love of all, God will answer.

When we create a culture of openness, of forgiveness, of reparation, of reconciliation, the consequences of our human failings are not erased, but are mitigated and eventually subsumed in loving relationships. It’s not painless: part of that openness is to understand and recognize our participation both as enablers and as victims of the violations of trust and perversions of love that our community has perpetrated and allowed to continue for years.

We are all the disciples; we are all the child Jesus places among them. Let’s neither become too attached to our privileges nor too fearful of our vulnerabilities, but welcome and accept welcome from each other. When we stop focusing on worldly power and status, and give to God “the kingdom, and the power, and the glory ... for ever and ever,”² we become little windows through which the light of God’s kingdom comes into this world. Jesus’s death was the ultimate version of this: rising from the dead as he promised, he showed that God’s kingdom is of a different and greater kind than human ones, founded on the universal and eternal love which inspired creation itself.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clericalism> , accessed 22 Sept. 2018.

² Coda to the Lord’s Prayer