

For the past several weeks, the texts we've been reading have been from the Wisdom tradition of the Bible--mostly from Proverbs in the Old Testament and from James in the New. Now, a lot of Wisdom teaching is practical advice on how to live in the world, like the description of the perfect wife in Proverbs 31 or these words of wisdom about hard work:

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways, and be wise. Without having any chief or officer or ruler, it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest.

A lot of these sayings are just good common sense. But James makes it clear that what we are really seeking is wisdom from above. Left to our own devices, he knew (as we all know) that we will often succumb to envy and selfish ambition, boastfulness, and deceit. We're human and we fail in many ways. But James advises us: "Draw near to God, who will then draw near to you." In other words, seek the wisdom from above, as James describes it: "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." Wisdom, for James, is not a human quality, but something that derives from God.

In the gospel, we have a wonderful example of human wisdom and God's wisdom. The disciples did not understand what Jesus was telling them about being killed and then raised up again, so instead they argued among themselves who was the greatest. Common sense really. Jesus was their leader, their mentor; who wouldn't want to be the #1 disciple of such a famous teacher? But that is human wisdom, not wisdom from above.

When Jesus took a child in his arms and said, "Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me," he was not teaching conventional wisdom or common sense at all. Now, as sweet a scene as that is, we need to understand the context of Jesus' actions and words. While Western cultures tend to place children first, ancient Middle Eastern cultures would place the child last. In the ancient world, children were not doted on; they lacked both status and power.

Theologian 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 of all his young child. When a famine came upon the land, children would be fed last, after the adults. Within the family and the community, the child had next to no status. A child was considered equal to a slave, who only after reaching maturity became a free person with rights. So when Jesus picks up a child and tells the disciples to welcome such a one in his name, it is not simply a tender scene. Jesus is once again being extremely provocative. John Dominic Crossan calls this a metaphor for the realm of God: a kingdom of children is a kingdom of nobodies.

It was hardly the scenario the disciples were looking for. Not only is Jesus including nobodies, letting them come near and listen to his teaching, now he's saying that they have to welcome all of the nobodies – as if they were Jesus himself.

For us today, this is not the same kind of provocative message. We love our children, grandchildren, godchildren and children of our friends. But at the systemic level, we've got a lot of work to do. We say that we as a society value our children, but one out of four children grows up in poverty. Not that poor parents can't give their children a lot of love. But poverty is still a handicap. It sometimes means there is not enough to eat. It can degenerate into homelessness. Single parents may have find child care that is substandard.

You've seen the statistics. Ironically, statistics such as teenage pregnancy rates, infant birth weight, premature births and infant mortality are highest in states whose leaders are strongest in opposition to health care reform.

And someone must speak up for the nobodies. All the nobodies. In the kingdom of nobodies, Jesus invites us to define "child" as any of "the vulnerable" of our society. Children in Jesus' day weren't the only ones who were devalued, who didn't count: the elderly, the sick, handicapped, illiterate, those cast out as unclean. Who are the people who still don't count in our day?

The homeless, those who have made poor choices in their lives, teenagers growing up in urban war zones, Alzheimer patients in nursing homes . . . As Barbara Brown Taylor put it, "They wanted to know who was greatest, so Jesus showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. God's agent. The last, the least of all...if we want to welcome God into our lives then there is no one whom we may safely ignore." No one whom we may safely ignore.

How to live in that kind of vulnerability ourselves? What if . . . here's an exercise that might seem awkward and even silly at first. But what if we would try to picture everyone we meet as a baby or a little child, as they once were? It's kind of like the idea of taking power away from people in authority by picturing them in their underwear. But this isn't about taking power away as a survival skill in the corporate jungle. This is about welcoming Jesus in the form of the little ones - even those who may repulse us or frighten us, or anger us. To picture that person as a child may make it far easier to welcome or receive them simply as a precious human being, rather than as someone who can do something for us, contribute something, or fulfill some other kind of expectation.

And finally, here's the real challenge: to become or imitate children ourselves. In Matthew's account of the same passage Jesus says, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the realm of heaven. Later in Mark, when the disciples rebuked people who brought children to Jesus to be blessed, Jesus said, 'Let them come to me, for the realm of God belongs to such as these. Anyone who will not receive the realm of God like a little child will never enter it.'" How seriously do we take these words?

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? An adult who has put away childish ways? Do you see a critic of all the ways you are not the successful person you think you should be? Or do you see a self-satisfied winner? Or - instead of looking for achievements and accolades, can you see a little child who is loved unconditionally and extravagantly by God? Is it possible, if just for fleeting moments of enlightenment, that we can be free of all the self-justifications that we adults use to prove our worth?

This invitation by Jesus to the kingdom of nobodies does not negate worldly ambition or success. It's not a call to act childishly or to abdicate adult responsibilities. It is a call to discipleship in a new kind of community with altered priorities, where the nobodies are somebodies, where the least of these would not only count, they'd be embraced, where wisdom from above is the order of the day.

A spiritual director tells the story of leading a retreat on contemplative spiritual practices and discovering that one of the participants was Samantha, a 7-month-old baby. He was concerned that her crying and fussing would be distracting. But he said that it was soon clear to everyone that she was the greatest contemplative among them. "In every session there she was, gazing with those big, dark eyes, holding steady with what was right in front of her, always ready to lock her gaze on another participant, drinking in the other's presence, beaming out with pleasure in the looking, in the sharing.

Those of us who have been in this world for decades struggle to remember this. We go on spiritual retreats to find our way back home to God and to ourselves. We struggle on the way with all the usual suspects of ego states: our need to get it right in thought and word and deed, our longing to be enough, our posturing for position, our eagerness to be noticed. Samantha was clearly at home in her own skin and in her world. She knew when she was hungry and when she was tired; she cried out when she needed to. But she was present in it all, gazing out in what seemed like love and speaking in tongues foreign to our ears. As I spent time with Samantha, that spirit of immediacy kept calling to me. There I was in a leadership role while my own barriers to presence were actively engaged--in my concerns about how things were going, thoughts of what needed to be added or taken away from my plan for the day, preoccupations about the flow of the teaching and attachment to my own perspectives.”

One afternoon I had set aside some time for participants to be outside. Just as we went out, the rain came down. Many headed for their rooms, but as I looked at Samantha looking at me I knew what I had to do. I took off my shoes and my socks, removed my watch and wallet, and walked outside. It was a gentle, warm rain, the kind of rain I loved to walk barefoot in as a child. Now as an adult, what do I fear in getting soaked? Why do I dash through the few rains I get “caught” in? Is there anything in my life that can’t be made better by the saturation of a summer rain? As I walked the grounds my eyes opened, my skin came alive and something asleep in me came awake. I saw everything with Samantha eyes—every flower, every drop-covered quivering leaf, every flash of bird wing overhead.

What will you do today to join the kingdom of nobodies? If you can’t think of anything – find a child. Go out and play. And learn the wisdom from above.

Amen