

Father O'Connor's Homily for 19 September 2021
Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time-B

Wisdom 2: 12, 17-20

James 3: 16-4: 3

Mark 9: 30-37

“Aging is mandatory but maturing is optional.” Or so the saying goes. We can't do a single thing about getting older. But we do have choices to make about maturing as we age.

Sometimes adults can still act like little kids. Today's Gospel is a case in point. The Twelve Apostles were walking with Jesus through Galilee to Capernaum and they were arguing about which one of them was the greatest.

And Jesus sets them straight when He says: “If anyone wishes to be first, they shall be the last of all and the servant of all.” And then – as a kind of visual aid – Jesus puts His arms around a child and says: “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.”

“Welcome a child, at whatever stage in their growth and development,” Jesus says, “and you welcome me.”

Children are wonderful blessings. But those of you who have them know that they can also be quite messy, quite noisy and they can keep us off balance.

A busy mother was getting dinner prepared for her family, and trying to get that last bit of catsup out of the bottle. Then the phone rang and she asked one of her daughters to answer it. And she did so very politely, as she had been taught.

“Mommy, it's Father Baker from church.” And then she says back into the telephone: “Mommy can't come to the phone right now, Father. She's hitting the bottle.”

Yes, kids can keep us off balance sometimes. And yet – even though they are small – they can teach us grown-ups some powerful lessons.

Look at all of their energy. They don't simply walk – they run, skip, hop, and probably would fly if they were able. And we mope along, dragging our feet and looking worn out. We can get a bit jaded in our outlook, a bit cynical and disappointed. And yet when we look at our children, they believe that anything is possible. They are full of hope and expectation. They see every person as someone to meet and to love.

“Aging is mandatory. Maturing is optional.” Jesus wants all of His disciples to grow in maturity and He gives us the formula and His example.

The formula: “If anyone wishes to be first, they shall be the last of all and the servant of all.”

And His example: Jesus, the Son of God, humbled Himself and became human. He chose to be the servant of all. And if we want to be like Him, we must become humble servants as well.

For insecure people, this can be a difficult lesson. They frequently try to mask their own insecurities by demanding a lot of attention for themselves or by trying to control others. Humility is very threatening for them. But Jesus is our model. He leads us from immaturity, where we are takers – to maturity, where we are givers.

A real temptation is to think that everybody else has it better than we do – perfect marriages, perfect families, perfect homes, perfect jobs. May I tell you from my vantage point of being a priest for 46 years that I do not know of any perfect marriages, families, homes or jobs. But I do know of lots of people who are working hard to improve in these areas – and they do make progress, one day at a time. But as for achieving perfection? Not in this lifetime here on earth!

Look at what happened to the Apostles with Jesus. They moved from immaturity, arguing about which one of them was the greatest – to maturity, becoming preachers and evangelizers, giving their lives for Christ and for His Church. They moved from being takers to becoming givers – from self-serving interest to self-giving service.

And so we continue to strive for and grow in maturity as humble servants each day with God’s grace.

There is a classic story about a lady who was going through some very tough times in life. And she was feeling very sorry for herself. One day she went to visit the village wise man, asking him how she could become happy again.

He gave her this advice: “Walk through a neighborhood and look for a home where you think there are no problems, and knock on the door. And when you find such a home, come back and let me know.”

She never returned because she never found a home where there were no problems. And she also discovered that she was a pretty good listener.

And moving from the misery of her self-pity to the ministry of serving others she became a very happy person once again.

And so Jesus gives us some very good advice today for our living: “If anyone wishes to be first, they shall be the last of all and the servant of all.”

We have Jesus’ own example and the gift of His grace – and lots of opportunities ahead of us, as we walk with Him as humble servants this week.