

Dear Brothers and Sisters



In light of the abuse scandal which is shaking the Church to its foundations, the words of today's Gospel are refreshing to hear:

Taking a child, he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one child such as this in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the One who sent me." Mark 9:37

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book 'Bread of Angels', commented on this Gospel. She noted that Jesus had a thing about children. While other people tended to ignore anyone shorter than their own kneecaps, Jesus saw what was going on down there.

He saw the toddler crying during Sunday Mass, he saw the little kids crying on their first day of school. He saw how adults coo-cooed them when there was nothing else going on but quickly lost interest in them the moment another adult appeared.

Children were fillers, not main events. But Jesus seemed to like them just the way they were. He wasn't fazed by the crying of babies. Even the two-year olds didn't bother him, he never asked their moms to take them to the cry room. On the contrary, when his disciples scolded people for bringing their children to church, Jesus was indignant. The kingdom belongs to such as these, he said. They are full-fledged citizens of God's kingdom –not later, but right now.

Children are innocent, playful, vulnerable, fresh-faced, and loving, especially if you are only around them for about fifteen minutes a day. But if you spend more time with them than that, then you know that children are also noisy, destructive, self-centered, unreasonable and surprisingly cruel. The best of them will use the dog as a football, or get mad when other children try to play with their toys.

So Jesus does not hold children up as moral examples. He did not say we should imitate them. He just said that when we welcome them in his name we welcome him, and that when we welcome him we welcome God. That is pretty amazing, when you think about it.

Do you want to spend some time with God? Get mud all over your hands as you help them make pies in the dirt, and don't worry that you have more important things to do. Listen to what a child has to say, without dismissing it as unimportant. Kids are not fillers. They are the main event.

Children are not in charge of anything, do not have any influence, will not be able to pay you back, they have no status or income. But they are great in God's eyes and are just what we need.

When St. Francis of Assisi founded a new monastery, the Friars were discussing who should be in charge. St. Francis appointed the most simple-minded Friar to be the Superior of them all. The other Friars were mortified, thinking this guy was an idiot. Francis told them: If the rest of you learn to obey him, the way he is, even when he makes mistakes, even when you think you know better, it will do you better than having everything in the monastery run efficiently and according to your plan.

Our lives are surrounded by the unimportant, the insignificant, those who are fillers on the way to more important things in our lives. The most obvious of these is Jesus himself. The great thing is that we can meet him, and welcome him, starting with the children around us.

Fr. Sean