

# Welcoming the Little Child: Reflecting on the Sunday Gospel

Brother Silas Henderson, SDS | Sep 18, 2015



Raul Luna CC

## *Reflection for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)*

*September 20, 2015*

*Jesus sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.”*

*Taking a child, he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it, he said to them,*

*“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.”*

*—Mark 9:35-37*

*To read this Sunday’s Mass readings, click [here](#).*

The gospels tell us that even “the Twelve”—Jesus’ closest followers—struggled to understand who and what he was. Those who traveled with Jesus recognized his special relationship with God (this was easy enough to see in the miracles he performed), but we can also imagine how confusing and even overwhelming Jesus’ sermons, parables, and miracles might have been. We can certainly understand how they might have missed the point of Jesus’ message and mission.

And so, we have this Sunday’s Gospel, in which we find Jesus’ closest collaborators arguing about which of them was most important. But when Jesus learns what they been discussing, he responds with an act that perfectly summarizes what it means to be a true disciple: he places a child in the middle of the group, telling them, “Whoever receives this child in my name, receives me.”

The world in which Jesus lived shared our own culture’s obsession with power and status, and a child would have been seen as a total non-entity in first-century Palestine. Children had no social status or legal rights. And so, as a “non-person,” to paraphrase Scripture scholar Daniel Harrington, S.J., a child would have been completely dependent on others for survival. Beyond that, however, anyone who cared for or showed kindness to a child could expect nothing in return. “By embracing the child,” Harrington concludes, “Jesus displays his acceptance of the child as worthy of respect and care.”

There is no great theological discourse or political rhetoric here. In a single gesture, Jesus summarizes the beauty and the mystery of his message: even those whom the world sees as insignificant are important in God’s eyes. To be Jesus’ follower means that we have to be willing to embrace those dismissed by the world. True greatness comes from serving others.

This kind of service and availability to the least members of society requires great humility and openness. Our care for children, vulnerable adults, the homeless, shut-ins, refugees, and migrants doesn’t offer us prestige, power, or wealth in return. And yet, Jesus is making it clear that this was to be the mission of the Twelve. It would have been as difficult for them to accept and live out as it is for us today.

To believe that Jesus is calling us to a life of discipleship means that we must be willing to place ourselves at the service of others. And this willingness to serve frees us from the division we hear about in this

Sunday's Second Reading: "Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice. But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits... and the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace" (James 3:16-18).

Jesus embodied this willingness to serve in his Passion and Death and these themes form the framework for our celebration this Sunday (see Wisdom 2:12, 17-20 and Mark 9:30-32). The invitation for us, then, is to open our hearts and be willing to sacrifice our time, gifts, and resources to create space in our homes and communities for those whom our society dismisses as unimportant.

*Who have I dismissed as being unimportant in the past?*

*Do I allow the needs of migrants, refugees, the homeless, the elderly, the abused, and the unborn to touch my heart?*

*What is the example of Jesus' own self-sacrificing service asking of me today?*

Words of Wisdom: "What does welcome a little child mean? It means giving loving attention to those who are often overlooked. I imagine myself standing in line to meet a very important person and noticing a little child passing by. Would I leave the line and pay all my attention to the child? I imagine myself going to a grand party where I will meet very interesting and powerful people. Could I forget about the party to sit on the street for a few hours with a man who stretches out his hands and asks me for some money? I imagine myself being invited to receive an award. Could I let the honor go to spend the time with a depressed, elderly woman who is forgotten by her friends and feels isolated in her apartment... To welcome the 'little child' I have to become little myself."—Henri Nouwen in *The Road to Daybreak*

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