

AGAIN, AGAIN!

If you have been around a toddler lately or have been in the past, you know that one of their earliest and favorite words is 'again, again.' In my house, it must be one thousand times that plastic doggy and plastic kitty have had a surprise party ending in a happy birthday sing-along. And after each and every time, Nora pleads 'again, again.' Kids will repeat things without limit, and unlike their dads and moms, they don't think about what else they could or should be doing. They just delight endlessly in the life of the present. Most of us see this childish tendency as something we grow out of; never to return to again. However, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus urges us not to grow out of this child-like state, but to prayerfully grow back into it.

In the reading, the Apostles become annoyed and dismissive about these pesky kids approaching Jesus. Who knows what tricks God-became-man did to delight these kids and how many times they begged, 'again, Jesus, again.' The Apostles, on the other hand, were coming to see the seriousness of their mission; who could blame them for wanting to be wise and prudent with their time and resources. "Sorry kids, the show's over, we have some adult stuff to take care of." Jesus rebukes the apostles, however, saying don't dismiss these kids, for "I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven." (Mt. 18:10) Apparently, as in so many things, Jesus reverses the world's conventional wisdom. Our child-like tendency to have no purpose or care for how we spend our days may be a stage we grow out of, but also a stage that Jesus bids us grow back into. For it seems that it reflects something of the very nature of God.

It is surely no coincidence that today's second assigned reading from our ancient lectionary are St. Paul's famous words about the limits of human wisdom and strength. "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom," writes Paul, "and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Cor 1:25) This passage means a great many things in its depths, but crucial to our purposes, it corrects a distorted image we tend to have of God. We moderns tend to think of God as doing everything with a purpose and an agenda which is wise and measured. And certainly this is an aspect of God's being. But all we have to do is look anywhere in Scriptures, or anywhere around us in God's creation, to see that far from purposeful and measured, God seems to be child-like in his boundless, foolishly wasted beauty and creativity.

God didn't make one star in the heavens for the purpose of Earth, or even 1000 stars. God made 100 billion stars, like a child would; again, again. This many stars do not exist to be functional, apparently God simply found joy in making them. An oak tree needs a way to make new oak trees, so an acorn has a purpose. But why do oak trees drop 10,000 acorns a year? It seems that God cares less for the efficient, than the magnificent. It seems, as Paul put it, that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.

Jesus reflects the nature of God even more clearly than God's natural creation. And it should come as no surprise that wisdom and prudence were not what made Jesus great, compared to a Socrates or Confucius. For the greatest of Jesus' teachings are not wise and prudent at all. "Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you." "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

We value these sayings not because they are wise, or we can justify them with an argument of prove them by examples. We value these sayings because they remind of us of something strange and deep within our own nature and the nature of God's creation, that runs deeper than wisdom or reason. We are to love our enemy because God sends rain on the just and the unjust and allows the sun to rise on the evil and the good. I am to be free from cares, because all of nature, even tiny birds and little flowers live by God's care alone. We are to love, even in the face of hate, because that is what Jesus did for us on the cross. This all seems quite foolish, and very difficult to live by, at that. Yet something in our hearts knows that we can't deny its truth.

We sense this truth now, but it was even more clear back then, when we were small. That's why Jesus admonishes us that 'unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.' We all have a lot of unlearning to do to unchain ourselves from the shackles of worldly self-sufficiency, and perhaps this explains why with great age we become less and less self-sufficient. Perhaps in the trials of old age, we also find a calling and blessing to return to a state of youthful innocence. Where we might find that all of our wisdom, and prudence must finally yield to the wonder of God's glory, and all of our strength to the relentless pressure of his Love, now and always amen.