

**I**n the past few Sundays, the lectionary readings were about how Jesus treated the children. Jesus talked about children quite a bit, and he often took a child to drive home the point. In today's reading, Jesus makes a strong statement with double negative:

Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

Entering the kingdom of God is a serious business for most Christians. But what does Jesus mean by the phrase, "as a little child"?

**T**his is one of the unique, theological statements that defy the traditional way of understanding how one enters into kingdom of God—meaning, how one gets saved. This statement defies the Pauline interpretation of salvation. According to Paul, one's salvation is secured by doing this:

Romans 10:9 - "...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord

and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.)

This scripture verse is frequently used, in order to provide the assurance of salvation to those who accept Jesus into their lives for the first time. How many of you have heard any evangelist saying that people needed to become like children, if they wanted to be saved?

As it is now, the modern Christian religion has tilted more to the Pauline texts for its inspirations than to the words of Jesus himself. It is more of a "Pauline" religion than a Christian one. I am not sure, if Jesus would recognize the Christianity, if he were to attend one of the churches today.

**I**f becoming like a child was that essential to gaining access to salvation, as Jesus taught, let us look at what children are like. These are what children do: they lie, they fight, they hate, they cheat, and they steal—just like adults do. Children are not

always good, and even they themselves know it. But children do not lie, so that they can start the illegal war and cause great deaths, mayhem, and damages, while fattening the friends and cronies who supply war materials.

Just like grownups, children would also discriminate—boys against girls, for example. Children would do that, because the grownups and the society showed them the examples by mistreating their wives and other women. If left to play by themselves, children will play with just about any one. They do not discriminate, as grownups do. As long as the grownups do not teach them to hate one another, children can make friends with just about any one with any skin color.

We know that children also cheat their schoolmates and in the exams. But they do not cheat their spouses, or their companies, or the governments of millions and billions of dollars. Children may steal, but they do not ruin the lives of countless others by

swindling millions and billions from their life savings.

Let us look at what the grownups do, then. The grownups do these things that hardly any child would do: the grownups commit immoral, unethical, and illegal acts of sexual exploitation, money-grubbing, and power-mongering. The grownups commit atrocities to other human beings and nations with cool heads, justifying their action with self-serving motives and embellished, moral high-grounds.

Grownups do lobbying, conspiring, spying, character-assassinating, back-stabbing, and equivocating that can bring down the innocent persons. If children lied or cheated, its consequence would hardly ever matter to other people's lives or nations, and would not do the egregious damages listed above.

In short, the children are *powerless*. That is the glaring difference between the grownups and children. If we accept this

lack of power as the criterion by which Jesus measures the qualification for the entry into the kingdom of God, it has some troublesome consequences for the grownups. The grownups steeped in power will never give it up, even for entering the kingdom of God. How many would quit sex-exploiting, money-grubbing, and power-mongering, because they were told?

My guess is that, given such a criterion, there would be precious little number of grownups who would like to become like children again. That is why the road that leads to life is narrow and hard, and there are very few walking on it.

It is obvious that Jesus understood this power relationship among human beings. When the disciples argued who is greatest among themselves, Jesus showed them a child. When his disciples shooed the children away, Jesus upbraided them and told them, "Let the children come to me; do

not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Jesus is indeed on the side of the weak and the excluded.

The very first power relationship that the children experience is the family into which they are born. Children learn about all the nuances of power within the micro-culture of their own families. Within this micro-culture, they learn not only the spoken rules but also the unspoken rules. They learn how a wife is treated. They learn how differently a boy and a girl are treated. They learn how to behave in front of the absolute power.

Children are being shaped by what they learn and practice, even though they do not know its name—justice or injustice. The culture of justice, or injustice, enters into sub-consciousness, and shapes their persons, as the family practices it. They learn what "the way things are" is, and how things are supposed to work in the world. Children absorb all

the right things and all the wrong things taught in that short period of very first formative years. In this micro-culture, called a family, it is the parents who wield the absolute power over their young children. When something goes wrong, it is the parents who make the decisions how to deal with it. That means it is the parents who should be held accountable for everything that happens within the family.

Among all the things that might go wrong in a family is a divorce. Jesus did talk about divorce, and made a statement that may not be so popular with today's culture. California is the first state in the union to enact no-fault divorce in 1969, under Ronald Reagan's government. Ironically, the California-Nevada Conference website listed a quote from Reagan and his son:

Mr. Reagan later said that signing the no-fault law was "one of the worst mistakes" he ever made in office.

His son, Michael Reagan, wrote in his book, *Twice Adopted*, that he

was only three years old when his father and Miss Wyman divorced. His description of divorce, "where two adults take everything that matters to a child - the child's home, family, security, and sense of being loved and protected - and they smash it all up, leave it in ruins on the floor, then walk out and leave the child to clean up the mess..."

I think Reagan's son captured the pain and suffering of the children whose parents divorce.

In Jesus' time, divorce was done in a different context. It was very easy for men to divorce, while it was impossible for women. And since men held the economic power and the title to the property and the children, once put out of the house, women had next to nothing to make a living. And besides, as no-fault divorce law encouraged, people tended to divorce, so that they might live with another—the younger, the prettier, or the richer person.

Jesus recognized that Moses allowed divorce for the reason

that men's heart was hardened. Nevertheless, what Moses allowed was against the principle found in Genesis 2:24, and Jesus concluded that "what God has joined together, let no one separate."

**O**ne may argue that no-fault divorce law leveled the playing field for women. But it did not level the field for the children. There is no law that can heal the wounds and soften the pain that children suffer, when their parents separate. Jesus advised against divorce because it was against God's principle, and because it was unfair to women. One can also argue that Jesus stood against divorce, because it hurt the children.

It may be that Jesus never married or had children, but he was the true family man of all time. May God bless you, as you keep what God has joined together.