

Homily – 29th Sun Ordinary Time – Year B – 2012

Now, about today's Gospel...What's up with James and John?...I mean, "Come on, what were they thinking?"... You would think that those guys who'd been following Jesus around for three years, would've known better than to ask Him for seats of honor on His right and on His left. ..Besides, a similar thing happened in the Gospel we heard four weeks ago, with the disciples arguing about which one of them was the greatest...And in both cases, Jesus sets them straight, telling them that greatness in the Kingdom of God is all about serving: "*Whoever wishes to be great among you, will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first will be the servant of all.*"...So here again we see how those original disciples – whom Jesus hand-picked to take His Gospel out into the world – were no different than most of us...Instead of focusing on serving God and their neighbor,...there they were jockeying for positions of status and power.

Now when Jesus equated greatness with servanthood, it was totally alien to the world back then; sadly, it's still much like that today...You see, Jesus came to change how we play the game of life..and He's been trying for over 2000 years to get us to play by His rules, but His message just hasn't sunk in.Our world can't seem to let go of the notion that in the game of life – like in every other game – there have to be winners and losers, and only the smartest,..or the richest,..or the strongest ,..will make it to the winners circle...This way of playing the game is instilled into us right from the beginning...Just look at the game of Musical Chairs we all learned to play in kindergarten.

You remember how it goes... All the children dance around a circle of chairs while music plays. Then, when the music stops everyone rushes for a chair, but there's a problem: there's one less chair than there are kids...So the smallest or slowest or weakest kid gets pushed out of the circle and has to watch the rest of them play..This continues as one by one children get kicked out of the circle...until the strongest or most aggressive kid manages to muscle his way into the last chair and raises his fist in triumph. ...He thinks he's so cool...The other kids probably think he's a jerk.

When we get out of kindergarten, the game doesn't change...It's pretty much the same in every area of life: power and strength come out on top...But Jesus tells us that this is not the way the game should be played...His way of playing Musical Chairs is much different;...It would go like this...When the music stops, there is still one less chair than there are children...But the rule of the game is that EVERYONE STILL GETS A SEAT,... which means that someone has to share their seat with someone else, or someone has to let another kid sit on their lap. ...So what happens?...The littlest kids who would normally be the first ones pushed out of the circle, become the favorites, because they won't take up much space in a shared seat or be much of a load in someone's lap...And the longer the game goes on, the more fun it gets, as the kids figure out how to keep everyone in the game with fewer and fewer seats...Until they're all sitting on one chair in one long lap upon lap upon lap,...and Jesus claps and cheers, ..because finally everyone has learned that when the game of life is played His way. No one loses,...the weakest are protected,... the bigger kids and the smarter kids and the stronger kids figure out how to keep everyone IN the game,... rather than how to get everyone else out.

I used a children's game to contrast the powerful and the powerless, because in our society children are the most powerless...the most vulnerable and dependent on others...This weekend, people across the country of all faiths are observing *Children's Sabbath* – a time to focus attention on the urgent plight of millions of children in our country...Children who are hungry,...children without access to health care,...children who are abused or neglected or abandoned,...victims of gun violence,...children in failing schools...children born into the pipeline to prison...children without safe, loving families. ...The hope is that by raising our level

of awareness about how these children are suffering, ...we will be inspired and motivated to respond and get involved in making a difference in their lives as Christ calls us to serve "the least of our brothers and sisters."

When I was writing this homily I was sitting on my screened porch watching the little boy next door pushing his toy lawn mower around his yard as his grandma swept off the patio,...and I found myself thinking about the little guy's future...Given the start he had in life and knowing a little bit about his family situation, I thought, you know it's a pretty good bet that when Ethan gets sick or gets hurt, he'll get good medical care...and He'll never be forced to sleep in a homeless shelter...or stand in line at a soup kitchen...He'll get a good education in a relatively safe environment. ...Odds are the little fella will never be abused or abandoned,...or live in a neighborhood ruled by gangs and staked out by drug dealers...or have an addicted or imprisoned parent...or become addicted or imprisoned himself...Yep, I thought, Ethan is a lucky little boy...But, tragically, there are millions of boys and girls in this country and thousands in Monroe county who are not so lucky.

I don't like quoting statistics in a homily, but I want to share just a few numbers that give us a picture of the harsh reality many children face every day. According to the Children's Defense Fund, in our country – this country – the US of A:

Every **29 sec** a child is born into poverty...Every **sec and a half** a public school child receives an out-of-school suspension
Every **47 sec** a child is abused or abandoned...Every **67 sec** a child is born w/o health coverage
Every **3 min** a child is arrested for a drug offense...Every **3 hrs** a child/ teen is killed by a firearm
Every **6 min** a child is arrested for a violent offense...Every **30 sec** an unborn child is aborted

There are many more numbers. I could quote that are equally as jarring and depressing...This is what is happening every day in the USA, the land of opportunity...the land of the so-called American dream.

Of course, there are numerous causes/reasons why so many children are suffering, and the task of making things better for them is a daunting one,...but we can't afford to look the other way because we feel we are not equal to the task...Jesus calls us to be great by serving...Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Everybody can be great because anybody can serve...You don't have to have a college degree...You don't have to make your subject and verb agree...To serve, you only need a heart full of grace...a soul generated by love."... The service we are called to do is more than giving of our resources, or giving of our time and talent,... which are all good of course....But, it's also about changing the structures and systems that are hurting and failing our children...by speaking out to our elected leaders and representatives... by insisting that every decision they make on laws, policies, budgets,...will take into account, the needs of children and the effects their decisions will have on children. ...We have to send them e-mails, make phone calls,...we have to vote...We have to work to get the right people elected...

Now, all you teens here who just returned from a weekend retreat...which I earlier heard you describe as a wonderful – even life changing - spiritual experience,...I know you realize that you have a supportive parish community here that cares so much about you, ...that it provides faith experiences like this retreat to help you grow in your awareness of Jesus's love for you, ...and help you come to trust that Jesus is in every part of your life,...especially in those darkest times when you need His strength and His courage to get you through...I ask you to please pray for those teens who are very much like you except they live in terrible circumstances...They don't have the love and care and support of a faith community.They don't know Jesus in their

lives...They don't have a faith they can draw strength and courage from.... Please pray for them...Pray that – like the theme of your retreat – they will leave their world behind,...to follow Jesus....and never turn back.

We put out an Amber alert when a child is in mortal danger, and the child's face is plastered on telephone poles, TV and newspapers...and everyone is expected to look out for that child and do what they can to rescue that child...My friends, this is Amber Alert time for millions of our nation's children. ...We won't get to see their faces or know their names, but Jesus knows each of their names and faces and stories...and He wants us to look out for them...to do what we can to rescue them...to give them a chance to have the full and abundant life He came to bring to all people...May we help to make it so...+.AMEN.