

Msgr. Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on September 21, 2003
Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Liturgical Year B

Molly was the youngest of her family at 8 years old. One evening, her whole family went to a nice restaurant for dinner. Everyone got a menu, even Molly. Since the conversation at the table was for “adults” – about politics, sports, finances – Molly sat there, ignored. When the waiter came for orders, he took Molly’s order last of all.

“What will you have, young lady?” he asked. Molly answered, “I’ll have a hamburger, French fries and a large Coke.” “No, she won’t,” said her mother. “She’ll have a small salad, baked chicken, carrots, and potatoes.” “And milk to drink,” added her father, momentarily distracted from the adult talk.

The waiter looked at Molly and asked, “Would you have ketchup or mustard on your burger?” “Ketchup,” said Molly. “And maybe a few fried onions on top. Oh, add a piece of lettuce too,” she whispered, “just to keep my parents happy.”

As the waiter walked away, Molly turned, beaming, to her parents and said, “You know what!? He thinks I’m for real!”

Growing up, I heard it often enough. “Children should be seen and not heard.” When you think about it, that phrase makes children of very little value. Here’s where Jesus’ powerful teaching enters in. In his society, children were not the center of life they are today in our culture. Children are not nobodies. They were the lowest on the economic and social ladder. Nobody paid them much heed beyond feeding them and keeping them in their place. Jesus is making a radical point in singling out a child as valuable. He’s making that child a symbol of everyone who is dependent, everyone we regard as unimportant, everyone we devalue as nonproductive. This is so typical of Jesus. He takes our standards of judgment, our hierarchy of importance, and turns it upside down.

The disciples, we know, had been arguing about their portfolios. Being a tax collector obviously means I know a thing or two about money. A successful fishing business isn’t built without management know-how, even if it leaves you a little smelly. And so on. Not terribly different from the way we value people. We look up to folks with medical and legal credentials; we tend to put maintenance folk and food service workers in a whole other category. Education, money, influence. Those, to most of us, make for value in this world. But not for Jesus - not then, not now. He didn’t lecture the disciples. He simply told them to make room in their lives for the children. Children, after all, have a different point of view.

For one thing, children are seldom if ever impressed by the credentials we use to impress on another. They don’t care - yet – about graduate degrees or top ten rankings. They don’t care if we are major stockholders. They don’t care much about where we live or how big our car is. Children, I submit, care about what matters to Jesus. Children care about what, according to Jesus, matters most to God. They want to know – are you real, are you warm, are you loving? Children ask: Can I believe you? Can I depend on you? Will you be there for me? A three-year-old cares very little that his dad is a senior partner. What concerns the three-year-old is whether his father will read him a story.

Of course, children are naïve. That's just the point. Sure, you don't put a four-year-old in charge of trust funds or portfolios. But all the same, in some very critical areas, children's feel for reality is better than ours. For them, the key is – do you love me? When all is said and done, that's a vital concern. So, says Jesus, put out the welcome mat for children. But put it out for all the children.

How frustrating it must have been for Jesus. For three years, in a host of different ways, he had been driving the point home. This kingdom of heaven was not about seeking rank, amassing wealth, building a power base. It was about service, about giving. According to Jesus, the top spots in heaven are not for people sitting on cushions sipping white wine spritzers. Most likely, if we take Jesus at his word, the stars in heaven will be on their knees, wash cloth in hand, to wash the feet of the littlest ones, the weakest, the neediest, wherever they come from and whoever they are.

Learn from children, says Jesus. They have a lot to say. They are, like our Molly, very much for real. Only – and this is the key – they are real in God's way, not necessarily in ours.

In South Africa, under the apartheid regime, it was apparently not uncommon for a white person to expect a black person to do a menial chore. One day, a white man, a very senior judge, came up to a black man and asked him to go to the post office and buy stamps. This time, the black man simply said, "No." "Do you know who I am?" raged the judge, now with fury. "No, I don't know who you are. I don't need to. I know what you are."

That's the child's question Jesus put to me today. What are you? What really matters to you? Who's really important to you? How will you answer? For that matter, how will I?