

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
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25th Sunday of Year B Mark 9:30-37

We all have little proverbs, sayings, adages, words of wisdom that we have picked up through life supposedly pointing out a path to follow—one that will get us to where we want with what we want. A friend of mine once shared with me one of the axioms that rules his life when he said, “If someone asks you to do a favor or help them in some way, do it, but always make sure they think you’re going out of your way to do it.” His idea was that this way the person he had helped would more assuredly be in his debt, so that at some future date he could “cash in” on that favor—all those I.O.U.'s he could redeem on a rainy day. It was also a subtle way of trying to manipulate and control people, while acting under the appearance of always being there to lend a helping hand—I don’t recommend it.

Today's Gospel invites us to reflect on how we see and do we ever “use” people; how do we treat them in regard to ourselves; what do we expect from them. We read that after Jesus tells the disciples that He will have to die, that he will have to give his life in self-less disregard, they are squabbling about the “pecking order;” who comes first, second and third in their little group. In short, their attention is focused on what they can get out of their association with Jesus—what kind of ticket to a better life can this Messiah, this miracle worker, provide than with. So caught up are they in the pursuit of their own self-interest, that they are totally bewildered by the announcement of His approaching death. For Jesus' call demands a heroic effort from self-centered individuals, whose self-love, St. James reminds us, is “the root of all evil.” The disciples are hardly to be criticized, at least by us who are so much like them; who are likewise tempted to view people as “means to an end;” who are inclined to ask ourselves what can he or she do for me someday. The paradox that Jesus speaks to the Twelve—“that he who wishes to come in first will have to serve the needs of all the rest”—certainly cuts against the grain for us, as well as for them. But as with so many things Jesus says, the truth of his words become clearer as we recognize what exactly He is talking about—that we are not told to be “doormats,” but we are told to be open to the needs of others, to be welcoming, to be hospitable.

The example that Jesus uses of the child is dramatic and instructive. He says that to welcome a child is to welcome Him; it is as to welcome God into our lives. But why pick the child as the example? A child stood at the very bottom of the socio-economic pyramid of Jesus’ day. No material advantage could be gotten from a child; a child in that sense was useless. A child had no money, no influence, no connections,

no inside information, and so no importance, no value. In a world accustomed to using people as means to an end, a child, and maybe those who are children, get you nowhere—except to God.

The words of Jesus about welcoming a child can be applied to us today. So often, we are inclined to write off people different than ourselves. We exclude them from our lives when we are indeed in a position to offer some help, because, in the back of our minds, there may be something telling us there is nothing to be gained by getting involved with them. It is by being open and inviting and helpful precisely to the one who appears as strange, as different, as having nothing to offer--it is precisely here that we are opened up to a world larger than our narrow, self-centered concerns.

For example, I have heard from any number of people, who worked in shelters maintained by different parishes providing for the city's homeless a decent place to sleep, how after overcoming their fears about how they would deal with these "street people," after talking with them, so many of these people said they actually received back from them in a very deep, human, personal more than they gave. We have to avoid what I call P.L.U.S., "the People Like Us Syndrome," whereby we only associate with people like ourselves, for then we live in a bubble of our own making. PLUS is actually a minus. We may be thinking we are speaking to God when we pray, OK, but the only way that God speaks to us is through the person who comes to us in their need. Am I willing to be there for that person, and put myself in a position to hear God's voice? If I prefer to live in my bubble, I am keeping God out.

Today's Gospel remind us, in the words of the book of Wisdom, "to cast your bread upon the waters, and it shall be returned to you many times over"--not in some calculating sense that because we have done some kindness to someone, now God owes me one, now I will get what I have been praying for. But rather in the very act of being of service to the one who appears to have nothing to offer, it is at that moment that we may well be letting down our defenses to let God in. We may in time come to receive something of real but intangible value from the ones that we might have been inclined to dismiss. We may be so changed in our attitudes and ideas that we come to receive more than we have given. And who is the "stranger" in our midst to whom we might offer a welcome? It could be any person whom it is our first impulse to write off as just being a waste of our time, as not worthy of our attention.

Let us pray, then, that we can see people, not with the eyes of calculated self-interest, not just for what we can get out of them, but as the rich treasures for who they are in themselves, as the ones who present us with the possibility of discovering who Jesus is, who God is, who we ourselves can be, when we allow these people into

our lives. Let us pray that we can learn to discover the presence of God in the faces of the most unlikely of people who cross our path.