

CONNECT! SUNDAY REFLECTION

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time | For Sunday, September 19, 2021

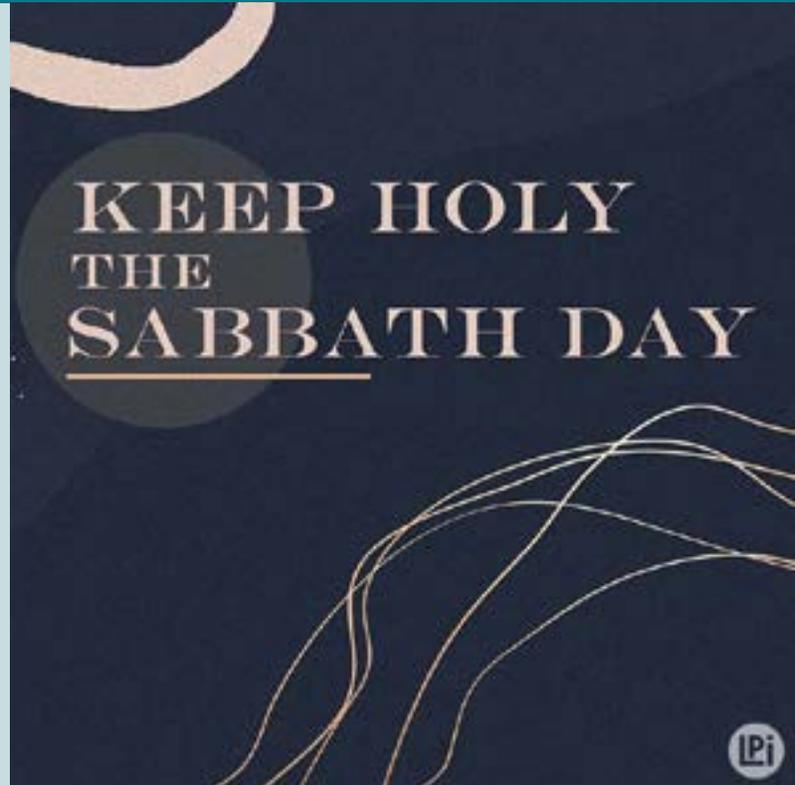
Who's On First?

Written by Fr. Mark Suslenko

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20

James 3:16—4:3

Mark 9:30-37



How we define the word “success” matters. Success is associated with the attainment of some goal or purpose. Taken on face value, this definition is not incompatible with what Jesus teaches. Being people of mercy and peace, for example, are certainly worthy goals in our Lord’s eyes. However, we run into trouble when the goals and purpose associated with our understanding of success are self-serving rather than in service of the Kingdom of God. We are so conditioned to put our efforts into obtaining privilege and status that we forget about matters of the soul and the heart. These often get pushed aside in our pursuit of more tangible, measurable, secular gains.

What about the essence of our being: our soul? Our world does a great job convincing us of the illusion that being first is best. Whether it be first in line, first to be picked for the team, getting into our first choice for college, first to finish their work or first in my social group to earn the most money, great satisfaction is supposedly achieved. Our egos can easily become our gods and we live this strangely attached yet sadly detached life where we are both connected and disengaged. Life becomes “something we do,” a series of predestined roles we play on the road to success. Our stages are set with all of the pieces we think we need to get us where we think we need to go. We dance from one to the next, barely taking time to breathe, as we touch each component making certain everything is where it needs to be. Yet in doing so, we tire of playing the puppeteer of our life’s characters and pieces, leaving our souls parched, lifeless and arid.

It is no wonder that [St. Oscar Romero](#) wisely said to, “Aspire not to have more, but to be more.” It is better to have our life stage set with less so that we can be more fully present, rather than set with multiple things in competition for our time. Quality, not quantity, matters most in the Kingdom of God. Jesus wants nothing to do with our secularly success driven lives. He sees no more value in those pursuits than he did with the money changers in the temple. In being consumed with our own personal advancement over a true investment of ourselves in life, we become no better than those money changers. The illusions are the same: me before you, the top is better than the bottom, us versus them, personal security and safety over universal harmony and peace, making more and more money versus time-honored principles and virtues such as honesty, kindness, and love.

The world and its people are in crisis. As a result, faith and family are suffering. We are often so confused trying to figure out “what’s” important that it’s not even funny. Our young families, especially, suffer. Running from one thing to another: dance recitals, hockey games, baseball games, karate, swimming, music lessons, and other extracurricular activities leaves everyone exhausted. One after another of these “necessities” for success take time away from “simply being” together as a family, properly worshipping God, and savoring life. We convince ourselves that all of these steps are necessary in order for our children to become successful. While each is fine to pursue in its own right, the way the package often comes together is destructive. Yet, we are overlooking what we really need to work on: our souls.

What we don’t realize is that human beings have lost something very important along the way in life: innocence. We also don’t realize that we really want and need it back. We get confused thinking that the “hole” we are feeling deep within is meant to be filled with something else. Only Jesus restores our lost innocence. There is wisdom to God’s wonderful commandment to “keep holy the Sabbath day.” We need a day of intentional worship and playful rest. When we can connect with the truth of God in Word and Eucharist, it makes all the difference in the world. We realize that the stages of our lives are not things that require the management of a skilled puppeteer but instead require the embrace and investment of a loving, engaged servant. In keeping the Sabbath holy, we also can find time in life’s business to celebrate and play! When we can be playful, joyful, and even somewhat carefree, life is good. Relationships are things to be celebrated and enjoyed.

That’s why Jesus loved the image of a child. There is a playful innocence about children. They don’t manage life, they live it! They also want to do things for you, especially if you are someone they respect, admire, or idolize. There is no selfish ambition present in the innocent child, only the desire to please. Thus we have here the makings of a good servant, one who is detached from a preoccupation with self so that they can be used by God in service of others. We cannot be useful instruments to God unless we begin to perfect the “ministry of being.” And we cannot begin to do that until we rid ourselves of the world’s illusions and invest ourselves in the Kingdom of God. When we make that challenging choice, the tables begin to turn. We may find ourselves moving to a lesser place in the world’s eyes but to a more prominent place in God’s eyes. Sadly, however, many find all of this too challenging.

St. Oscar Romero continues with words of wisdom when he says, “Beautiful is the moment in which we understand that we are no more than an instrument of God; we live only as long as God wants us to live; we can only do as much as God makes us able to do; we are only as intelligent as God would have us be.” Now there is a recipe for success! Imagine what the world would look like if we all really believed this and taught this as a firm and necessary lesson to our children! We could actually stop worrying about being first and experience the joy of life. And when we experience joy, we experience God; who is life for our souls.

Fr. Mark Suslenko

PRAYER

Eternal God who is so accessible yet mysteriously and wonderfully inaccessible,
I desire to find You, behold You, know You, and love You with all my heart.
I also desire to feel Your love for me. This is enough. I need nothing more. Desiring what You desire, I willingly give myself over to Your service.
The air I breathe and the breaths I take are Your gifts to me.
With each intentional breath I now take,

You release me from what weighs me down
and carry me to what nourishes my soul.
You breathe life into the tired recesses of my soul and touch me where no one else can touch.
Only You know Your way there.
I want to stay with You a while and enjoy our visit.
After this brief and intimate time together,
I will return to what I must do.
I do so with a heart that is more devoted to you,
a mind more attuned to your ways,

and a spirit strengthened and readied to do your will.
Restore the innocence and playfulness of those days when You were fashioning me in my mother’s womb.
Help me remember what we shared so that we can live in that wonder again.
May the pure delight and joy we discover there warmly touch those I meet today!
Amen.

(Fr. Mark S. Suslenko)