

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A-2023

One of Jesus's attributes that literally speaks volumes about the nature of God is His profound love and respect for children. He delights in and blesses them. They are recipients of His human and divine touch. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus was even more bold and straightforward in His praise of the dignity of children: "Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." In turning and becoming like children, we become the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. We become great saints in the eyes of God!

In today's Gospel, Jesus shares a similar sentiment whenever he proclaims: "I give praise to you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, You have revealed them to the little ones." So, what are these qualities that children tend to possess that give them a leg up in their relationship with Jesus Christ? How can we become and remain "little ones" before our Savior?

I would like to elaborate on these qualities through the lens of the modern classic comedy, “Home Alone.” The McCallister family was headed to Paris, France to celebrate the Christmas holidays. During the night there was a power outage, and their alarm clocks did not go off. In their panic to get to the airport on time for the flight, they accidentally forgot their young son Kevin. They did not realize he was not with them until they were halfway to Paris. Due to all the flights being booked, it would take over two days for them to be able to return home to Chicago. Therefore, Kevin was home, all alone. At first, Kevin was on top of the world. He loved his newfound freedom. He could do what he wanted, when he wanted, and how he wanted. After the initial excitement wore off, he began to miss his family and feel the effects of his separation from them. His desire for independence gave way to his need to be dependent on, and interdependent with, his family. Total independence was not everything he thought it would be.

One of the fundamental qualities of spiritual childhood is that we habitually recognize our dependency on God. Regardless of our chronological age, personal maturity, level of education and sophistication, personal and career success, and holiness of life, we realize that we need

God. We need His love, grace, mercy, and wisdom in the nitty gritty of daily living. We recognize that He is the One that sustains us in life and in health, blesses us with our personal and spiritual gifts, and has provided us with an inherent inner drive and necessary opportunities. By faith, we embrace that even when we have done our part, it is our ongoing relationship with Jesus, that makes everything possible. Even when our health, prosperity, talent, and opportunities are lacking, we recognize that Jesus can draw straight with the crooked lines of our lives. In His amazing love, we can still be channels of His grace, even with our sinfulness, limitations, and brokenness. We also recognize that by being interdependent, or in a two-way relationship with God, we experience a soulful joy and satisfaction. As St. Augustine so eloquently reminds us: "Our hearts were made for You O Lord. And our hearts are restless, until they rest in you." We can also experience this mutual relationship as a partnership. When we are in an active partnership with Jesus, our personal and spiritual efforts have the power to bestow the blessings of God on ourselves and other people.

In the movie Home Alone, Kevin possessed a playful spirit, whether he was by himself or with other people.

He had the capacity to enjoy life to the fullest. A spirit of playfulness is another important dimension of spiritual childhood. For those who view faith primarily or solely in terms of seriousness, these words can seem very inappropriate or even scandalous. A spiritual writer I admire taught me that we can learn about and personally experience the attributes of God, through His creation. From this lens, the human family and the animal world are permeated by a spirit of playfulness. Since everything comes from the hands of our Creator, we can conclude that playfulness is an attribute of God. How about that?

Like Kevin McCallister, Jesus wants us to bring a spirit of playfulness to our relationships with Him, others, and ourselves. By embracing and cultivating a spirit of playfulness, we become more like God and are more fully united to Him. We also bless and edify others with the gifts of our joy, laughter, and passion for life. Whenever we deny, reject, or suppress, this spirit of playfulness, we lose an important part of our humanity, fellowship with Jesus, and effective Christian witness. The Good News is that these things can be renewed and restored simply by cultivating a spirit of playfulness. Jesus does not want us to always to take life, ourselves, and others, so seriously

all the time. It is not good for the soul. It is not good for our relationships. It is not good for our health. At appropriate times, and in appropriate ways, the Lord wants us to bless Him, ourselves, and others, with a spirit of playfulness.

In the movie “Home Alone,” Kevin had to protect himself and his family home from two burglars. It was ingenious and hilarious how he came up with so many creative ways to fend them off and discourage them from following through with their criminal intentions. Another important component of spiritual childhood is an openness to allowing God to be God and showing us all the different and creative dimensions that make up His awesome God self. We tend to put God in box. We tend to think to ourselves, God can only be this way. He can’t be that way. God can only do this. He can’t do that. God can only reveal Himself this way. He can’t reveal Himself that way. God can only love these people. He can’t love those.

We are more inclined to think this way in terms of our image of God and the display of his presence and transforming power. For example, God can only reveal Himself to me in this particular way. God can’t deliver me from my sinful and addictive habit. God can’t deliver

me from my deep emotional wounds. God can't work through me in my sinfulness because I am unworthy. God can't keep loving me in my serious sinfulness. God can't possibly keep on forgiving me. Oh yeah!!! Watch Him. If we open ourselves to these possibilities. If we keep inviting Jesus and His grace into every nook and cranny in our lives, with time and patience, we will begin to personally experience His healing and transforming power. In a spirit of humility and perseverance, we just need to keep asking for His grace and mercy. Jesus promises us that "Nothing is impossible with God."

In "Home Alone," Kevin took in all of his personal experiences like a sponge. Embracing a life of spiritual childhood involves taking in God and the things of God like a sponge. We hunger and thirst to experience more of God. We hunger and thirst to share God with other people. We hunger and thirst to learn more about God: His person, His teachings, His will. Even though we may have heard or read a particular teaching of Jesus or the Church numerous times, we strive to take it in with a fresh openness of spirit. We realize we are not the same person or in the same place as last time we encountered it. We allow it to be food for our souls in a new and different way. We become like sponges because the

deepest desire of hearts becomes to know, love, and serve God. We are called to be open to being continually surprised by God and in total awe of His love, grace, and mercy.

The heart and soul of spiritual childhood is captured in the following words of the Christian band Petra: “Don’t let your heart be hardened, don’t let your love grow cold. May it always stay so childlike, may it never grow too old. Don’t let your heart be hardened, may you always know the cure. Keep it broken before Jesus. Keep it thankful, meek, and pure.” Love is the foundation and cornerstone of spiritual childhood. It involves a fundamental openness to, and concern for, other people. As St. Paul reminds us in speaking of the spiritual gifts: “The greatest of these is love.” And putting a positive spin on his spiritual treatise: “If we have love, we are everything.” “If we have love, we gain everything.” I would like to add, both in this life, and in that life that never ends, because GOD IS LOVE.

