

Years ago I had the privilege of observing – from time to time – a certain almost-three-year-old child ride his tricycle. Engrossed is the word that comes to mind to describe both of us. I was as absorbed in watching him as he was in his three-wheeled transportation. It was both amazing and amusing to watch him whip around the concrete pavement, leaning to the left, then the right, allowing himself to feel with all his body the centrifugal pull of his turns. There was this odd mix of both intense care and wild abandon as he suddenly would stop, get off, and study one of the wheels, or a bolt on the tricycle's chassis, only to jump back on and take off, dropping into some sort of death spiral around a poor unsuspecting bug or interesting rock. It was almost as if the child and the tricycle had become one. Where the trike transported him mattered very little. The child was wrapped in the experience.

As I watched I knew it would not be long before the child would move on to the more precarious two-wheeler. And a bicycle for this child will be just a exhilarating, for a while. He will have shed a wheel, and transportation will seem a bit edgier and more fun. But at some point the bicycle will become the means to an end, merely the vehicle for going from home to a friend's house, and back again. And slowly, over time, the bicycle will be set aside for a car. And this child may later in life pick up a bicycle again, but never in the same way that he straddled and steered that tricycle. The bicycle in adulthood will remain a means to an end – a means of achieving goals – whether they might be shedding a few pounds, going further or faster, or as a mountain escape from “real life.” In the movement from three years of age to thirty goals and outcomes seem to replace the pure joy of experience. When this does occur it signals a shift towards a more precarious movement in life.

*“When he was in the house Jesus asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.”*

The disciples have stumbled. On the heels of hearing about Jesus' impending death and resurrection they vie with one another for the title of Jesus' best. When faced with the possibility of the loss of their Messiah – the death of their Savior – they place their future not in God's hands, but in their own. Our scripture tell us they were afraid, and out of this fear they ask themselves “who among us is greatest?”

In one sense, they may be ignoring the facts Jesus has set before them, asking “Who among us will be second in command when Rome is overthrown and our Israel is restored?” In another sense they may have actually heard Jesus, asking, “Well, who will lead us when he is gone?” They are setting in place contingency plans. Shame and guilt punctuate the profound silence that meets Jesus' question about their argument. But rather than chastising them for their recurring faithlessness, Jesus places a child in their midst. Jesus upends their question about who is greatest by setting before them the slightest and most inconsequential. Reorient your thinking, Jesus says. The greatest is the one who becomes least and servant of all. A child.

But why a child? Why not a tax-collector, a leper, a Samaritan, or some other marginalized and over-looked adult of Jewish society? Certainly they were among the least as well. Perhaps one reason is because a child is largely defined by relationship. As opposed to the tax-collector and the Samaritan – who are defined by what they do or believe – the child is defined in relation to an adult, particularly the parent. Children necessarily have parents, whether they are living or not. None of us sprang forth from the ground. I am the child of Kilmer and Jane Combs. If someone were to ask me, “Did Kilmer Combs have any children?” it would be

nonsense for me to answer, “Well, he did, but they have grown up.” No, I would say, “Yes. I am Kilmer’s and Jane’s child.” My dad has passed on, and I am an adult, but that matters very little. I have always been, and will always be, Kilmer’s child. You see, it is relational. You cannot outgrow being your parent’s any more than you can outgrow being a child of God. The confusion comes when we define ourselves as something we are not, when the child confuses himself or herself with their parent. The disciples imagine themselves as Christ’s equal or replacement rather than as children of Christ, and therefore children of God.

Perhaps another reason Jesus sets a child before the disciples as an example may have to do with the openness and willingness of children to be fully engaged with God. In her book *The Religious Potential of the Child* Sofia Cavalletti describes four characteristics of children in their relationship to God. First, the child is naturally attracted to God. Second, the child finds joy in the discovery of God. God is not fearful or scary. Third, the child naturally intuits the mysterious. And finally, the child has a natural capacity for prayer. Cavalletti notes that all of these combine to allow the child to move easily between their world and that of the transcendent. She finds that at the core of the relationship between the child and God is love: both the child’s capacity for love and the child’s need of love. She notes, “the child’s need to be loved depends not so much on a lack that requires filling, but on a richness of love that seeks something that corresponds to it.” The love of the child seeks to be one with the love of God.

And so I am reminded of that certain almost-three-year-old child who became one with his tricycle. I would like for us to imagine our life in God as that tricycle. The large wheel might be love: our love for God and our felt experience of God’s love for us. Love is the big wheel that steers and drives us. The two back wheels provide for us support and balance. On the one side love is steadied by our experience of God. This includes of course our prayer life, our communion with God one-on-one where we hear and are heard. This “small wheel” also includes our worship life in this place, as well as our intentional education, growing in the knowledge of God through study and interaction with one another. And so love is balanced on one side by prayer, worship, and growing knowledge. On the other side love is supported by our life lived out, our actions in this world. Remembering Cavalletti’s words: love seeks something that corresponds to it. Love must be lived out, and when love – experienced as coming from God – is put into action it is always – always – an act of creation.

Our life in God as a tricycle, with love driving us and steering us, balanced by our experience and knowledge of God on one side, and acts of creation on the other. Each wheel depends upon the other. To lose a wheel is detrimental. To have “love” without knowledge and prayer is to act in the world blindly and uncertainly, finally centering on ourselves as the source of love. To have “love” without acting on it is to simply drive in circles. But worst of all is to lose the big wheel. To attain a certain kind of knowledge of God and to act on that knowledge without love is perhaps the most dangerous of movements; this has been the source of Christianity at its worst, propagating fear and acts of destruction. Our life in God needs the balance of love, prayer/communion, and action. When we live without this balance – when we lose a wheel – we become all wobbly and dragging on one end or another, just scarping along, making a lot of noise and throwing off sparks. Life in God requires all three.

What might it be like to ride this three-wheeler of life in God with the all-engrossing passion of an almost-three-year-old child? What might it be like to give ourselves over to the guidance of love fully informed by our prayer, experience and acts of creation? What might it be like to allow ourselves to feel with all our heart, mind, and spirit the centrifugal pull of God moving in our lives? What might it be like to use our life in God not as a means to meet some

goal or arrive at some preconceived destination, but rather for the experience of meeting love with love?

Tricycle-riding is meant for the child. It is meant for you, and for me. May God grant us the grace to take our seat with that odd mixture of care and wild abandon. May God so open our hearts that we know what it means to love and be beloved. May God open our eyes and ears to God's Word alive in our world. May God so open our spirits that we are drawn to seek and serve the corresponding love of all people, acting always to create and not destroy. May God grant that we become that tricycling child, wrapped in the experience of meeting love with love.

When asked what was the most difficult instrument to play Leonard Bernstein famously quipped, "That's easy. Second fiddle."

In this morning's gospel we find Jesus passing through Capernaum once again, this time in secret. He has something that he really wants his disciples to understand. He tells them that as God's only Son he will be betrayed into human hands – the hands of men and women that will kill him, and three days after dying rise from death. He says these things to the disciples with all the frankness of a child. He has spoken of his imminent death and resurrection once before, but it seems he wanted to reinforce the lesson. Perhaps he had a sense that the teaching did not stick.

Well, it seems that this lesson did not take, for along the way an argument ensues between the disciples about who is the greatest, who is first fiddle.

I saw a bumper sticker not long ago that read: "Why is it that grandchildren never go around showing snapshots of their grandparents?"

Comparing the hands that receive him into death with the hands of the child.

Jesus stands conventional wisdom on its head – reversing first and last – emphasizing servant hood. The truly great person is a diakonos – a deacon – a servant – a person who spends his/her day taking care of other people. We think of successful people as being "on top" and unsuccessful people as being "at the bottom." "Jesus chose another image, the image of 'arrounders.'

-It may seem strange to us that immediately after hearing Jesus talk about his impending death, the disciples would argue about who is the greatest. Not so at all. They didn't understand what he was about any more than the church 2,000 years later understands. They saw the adventure coming to a glorious conclusion. There would be a struggle with the powers in Jerusalem, he would win, and they would reap the spoils of victory. They had better get the pecking order assured now. The rude awakening was that there would be no place for that kind of thinking in the new order Jesus would bring in. The new order would turn the old order upside-down.

A young rabbinical student asked the rabbi, "Rabbi, why don't people see God today as they did in the olden days?" The wise old man put his hands on the student's shoulders and said, "The answer, my son, is because no one is willing to stoop so low." Stoffregen

Striving to seek the infinite. Blasé Paschal: Mathematics will tell us that the infinite is found in two directions. When asked to describe infinity we tend almost universally to speak of the universe, of enormity, of largeness stretching on forever. Paschal reminds us that the other infinity is that of the infinitely small.

Leonard Bernstein: When asked what the most difficult instrument was...answered...2nd fiddle.

Christianity Today, offers this remarkable insight, "Christ points to children because they are such wonderful receivers."

-Funny that grandchildren never go around showing snap shots of grandparents