

Homilies for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time:

- [Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle B - Don L. Fischer](#)
 - [Hold a Baby to Your Ear - Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)
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Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle B

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 2:18-24; Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16

The Scriptures are intended for a very specific purpose: They are intended to teach us. They are to inform us, not so much about what we are supposed to do, but they are to inform us as to who we are and who God is. They are works that help to reveal the nature of God, the nature of each of us, so that in understanding who we are and who God is, we can make better choices. We can enter more fully into what we call life, what we call reality. I'd like to begin our reflection with several words from a musical piece written by the twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen. I love her words that tell us the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit in us, is a Spirit that doesn't exist to come into our lives to make us do something or to judge or condemn us. It doesn't come to always call us somehow to a level of high accountability. That's part of it, I suppose. The main thing that this Spirit of God, this person of God we find in the Scriptures, comes to do is to give us life. To animate our lives. He's created us, but that's not enough. He wants us to be happy. To be full.

In the first reading from Genesis, we find the story of God creating things. There's a pattern to all of those six days of creation. The pattern would go something like this: God speaks. And when God speaks, something happens. His word is powerful. If he says it is, then it is. God names things, and he looks at them and he says, "You know, this is really good. This is very good." As we read in the Genesis story of creation, we see that God has created all these things by his power. By naming them, he has an incredible relationship with everything he has created. He is basically in charge of all of them. And then, he creates this human being. It's the only time in all of the creation story that he does this one thing: He pauses. He says, "Wait a minute. This isn't quite complete. There's something wrong here. There's something more that is needed." After God creates man, he realizes that it is not good for man to be alone. To create one man is not what he wants. Notice that God did not create one animal; he created animals. He created fish. He created all the birds in the sky. But he just made one human. Now we know that all of the stories of the Scriptures are there to reveal to us the nature of who we are and who God is. We recognize that after God created one man, he realized that this figure needed someone else like him. Animals weren't enough to please him. He had power over animals. The story unfolds so that we understand that God realizes that man needs someone like him who is equal to him, who is from him. Who is a part of him to be with. One of the things we understand about God's creation is that when it comes to the pinnacle, the part most like God, it must be relational. It needs to be in relationship to someone like him. That's revealing something about human nature, but it's also in a very intriguing way giving us

an indication of who God is. We are made in God's image. If God makes us in his image, and says man isn't good on his own and needs a partner, then he's also saying that God needs, wants, longs for a relationship. Now it's somewhat difficult to think of God in terms of need, but clearly our God delights in relationships. Our God wants a relationship with us. He wants us to be in a relationship with someone else.

We begin to see that the nature of human beings, like the nature of God, is communal. When we recognize this simple truth, we see that it is not simply an option to be in right relationships. It is life. It is the way life flourishes. If there is one single thing that I would put above all our other responsibilities in order to respond to the gospel that we read, it is that the gospel is seeking to put us in right relationships. When we are not in those connected relationships, there is something in the human soul that knows something is missing. Life is flat. Life doesn't seem to have the energy it should have. We know that one of the facets of human nature is that it is inconsistent. There isn't any way in which we are going to feel the benefits of healthy relationships in a kind of euphoric sense that throughout life we never experience loneliness or struggle. My sense is that when we are in good relationships, there is a basic struggle that goes along with those relationships because of the very nature and purpose of why we are in relationships. Relationships are not just for nurturing. It's not just that relationships make us feel good and give us a sense of value. It's also because they are the ways that God seems so carefully to have chosen to change and transform us. That means our relationships are going to carry both comfort and pain. Comfort in the sense that relationships nurture us, but pain in the sense that they challenge us. Relationships demand certain things of us. We can't get away with certain illusions when we are in a healthy, open relationship. We can't indulge ourselves in anything we want when we are in a committed, monogamous relationship. What it seems that God has planned is that we work out our salvation and we work toward this life development — the Spirit of God working in us — through relationships.

Let's look at the reading from Hebrews, which says that this God has come into our world to save it. He is not going to save it by standing off at a distance and speaking to it. God decides that the only way he can teach these people about how to live — and who he is and who they are — is by entering into a relationship with them. So God comes down and becomes a part of this world. He enters into a relationship with humans. With regular people. Some are extraordinarily good, innocent, and wonderful, easy to be with, in a sense. Others are very difficult to be with. Some want to give him life; some want to destroy him. Some want to love him; some want to see him fail. They hate him for who he is. God enters into all of that, and this is what we are invited to do. It's in every relationship, and it's in every community. All of those kind of mixtures of positive and negative energies are part of our relationships. What is interesting to me in this reading from Hebrews is that it says, "It was fitting for this God to enter into this world and to save us by connecting with things that were not necessarily what he always hoped they would be, and he suffered it." Now remember that the word "suffer" means to accept. It doesn't mean to be in pain. We have to suffer joy. We have to suffer pain. We have to suffer the most intimate, wonderful moments in a relationship, and we have to suffer the times when the very fact that the relationship is empty (in the sense that it's not what it is supposed to be at that moment) is even fifty times more painful than if there were no relationship. We have to suffer all of that. It's interesting that this God of ours says that the way he is going to save the world is that he is going to come into the world to enter into relationships and to suffer them. That means to embrace that which is positive and to embrace that which is negative. And somehow, all of this is going to pull us through a process that is going to feel like death. Jesus was literally killed by relationships. He tried

to enter into a church and to help it by trying to show them who they really were. I am sure they saw this as a condemnation of who they really were because they were so far from who they should have been. They counterattacked with crucifixion, with destruction. The key part of the story is it didn't destroy him. In fact, it did the opposite.

When Jesus suffered all of this, did it lead to ultimate destruction? No, it led to ultimate resurrection and a deeper, more powerful connection with people. That's what resurrection of the body means: Jesus literally came back and was able to walk and talk with the people. He was able to touch them, in a state that was transformed by his suffering. Obviously, there is something in relationships that we are invited to suffer so that we can come to a place that is fuller. That is richer and more powerful. The Pharisees come up to Jesus in the gospel story, and they are always trying to push his button. They are always trying to make him angry or get him to make a mistake. They ask him about the issue of divorce, which was a hot issue. Let me explain something about divorce in the time Jesus was living. There was at the time of Jesus a very unhealthy divorce system. It went something like this: The man is the king. The woman is his property. He can get rid of her for any reason whatever, and she cannot get rid of him for almost any reason whatsoever. Maybe if she's lucky, she can convince someone to convince him to divorce her if she's miserable. It was very clear that the woman was not equal to the man. I remember in this gospel of Mark that Jesus has been talking to his disciples most especially about the whole issue of greatness in the kingdom and who is the most important. He's trying to weed out of them and free them of all the things they get caught up in in terms of power. And who's in charge. Who's in control. What he's really concerned about here is not so much the issue of divorce and remarriage as much as he's concerned about the issue of inequality in relationships.

Most especially, Jesus is concerned about the relationship between men and women. He says that a man and a woman, in relationship, cannot become one flesh unless there is a different attitude toward your partner. You can't think of your partner as your property. You can't think of your partner as something you can use, abuse, take from — and not have a responsibility to. And so, with that system at the time, I think Jesus' answer was absolute genius. Instead of saying, "Well, let's talk about these different complaints from men about their wives. Or wives about their husbands. He doesn't say, "Let's come up with a different system." Instead he says, "What people really long for is a relationship in which two people see themselves as equals. They see themselves as extraordinarily essential to each other, in the sense that they have a role to play that is unique, powerful, potent, dangerous. And they respect that. When they respect that process, when they really become intimate, when they are committed to one another and there is a monogamous relationship in which they look to each other to be a source of life to one another, then the two have become one." Jesus is saying that this is the goal. This is the ideal. This is what we are made for. The Catholic Church understands the dilemma of a marriage that isn't life-giving. It understands that people who have divorced have not necessarily committed a sin as much as that they perhaps have made a mistake or have not been able to achieve the goal that Christ is talking about. There are all kinds of ministries available today, in this Church that has struggled to understand divorce and marriage for 2,000 years, that really allows people a second chance. But that doesn't change the goal, the insight that Jesus longs to place before us: A committed union of equals who truly respect each other and who recognize the gifts they can bring to one another. In the story from Genesis, we see that man did not create woman. Man was put into a deep sleep (so it didn't look like he was the one who had anything to do with this) and God was the one who created this equal partner.

It's interesting that right after Jesus has talked about the importance of the dignity of women and stressed that women should be treated as equals and not as property, he focuses his attention on children. Why would Jesus, after speaking about the importance and dignity of children, immediately go to a child? Because in this culture, there were two groups of people considered of less value than a male: Women and children. If a man divorced his wife and she did not have any place to live, she was cast out as a beggar. She had no choice but to find another man. That's why in another passage, Jesus says that if you divorce a woman, you force her to commit adultery because that's her only chance. She can only enter into another relationship in order to survive. This image of the importance of children and not treating them as second-class and the whole issue of the gospel is focused on the dignity and the value of individuals. Every individual is essential, and what Jesus longs for is that these independently created, equally important and valuable creatures of his are designed to be in relationship. They are designed to be connected to each other. The Spirit that he gives to the world and to people is the capacity to be in these relationships. It's not easy. It was never intended to be easy. We have to suffer through so much to get through to the gold and the goodness. But it doesn't mean that it isn't a gold worth struggling for or worth suffering through. Our nature longs for relationships the most: God longs for relationship with us; we long for healthy relationships with each other. In the words of Hildegard of Bingen, we believe that those relationships are vehicles of Spirit giving life to our spirits.

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Hold a Baby to Your Ear

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Whoever the powers be that link liturgy to life, they have betrayed me today. With seminarians for my congregation,¹ I am confronted with the miracle of marriage—its origin in Eden, its permanence in God. Not mine to make wedlock too winsome for you; not mine this day to sell celibacy to you.

Fortunately, the minor functionary whose task it was to divide the Sunday Gospel into a "longer form" and a "shorter form" has come to my rescue. He allows me four additional verses: the exciting episode where children are brought to Jesus "that he might touch them." The disciples rebuke the parents; Jesus rebukes the disciples. He takes the little ones into his arms, blesses them, and issues a stern warning to his closest friends: "If you do not receive the kingdom of God like a child, you will not enter it" (Mk 10:13-16; cf. Mt 19:13—15; Lk 18:15—17). For all its brevity, the episode is crucial for every Christian, suggestive for every seminarian. Two questions for your reflection: (1) What was Jesus saying to his disciples then? (2) What might Jesus be saying to his disciples now?

I

First, what was Jesus saying to his disciples then? Two words from the incident rise above the rest, two mysterious realities: kingdom and children. Kingdom rings hollowly in our ears, gives off bad vibes: bloody kings like Herod who butchered all those children, mad

kings like Ludwig who built all those castles. And still, like it or not, kingdom is critical for a Christian. Not simply because the Synoptics use "kingdom" 107 times; more importantly because it is the gospel in a nutshell, it sums up why the Son of God took flesh. What did Jesus proclaim when he "came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God"? "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15). And what did Jesus answer when the people of Capernaum wanted to keep him to themselves? "To the other towns as well must I preach the good news of God's kingdom, because it is for this that I was sent" (Lk 4:43).

How did Jesus understand this kingdom? Not easy to say. He never favored us with a definition; he preferred to speak of it in parables; he revealed it not to the wise of this world but to the childlike, the innocent, those unspoiled by learning (cf. Mt 11:25); and, to prove his point, we the wise have for centuries spilt oceans of ink over it. For our purposes, see God's kingdom not spatially, some super-Arthurian empire covering the globe; see it rather as God's kingship or lordship, His ruling or reigning. But not lordship as an abstract concept, the eternal rule of the Creator. Jesus eyed the kingdom after the fashion of the prophets and psalmists: God personally, graciously, lovingly breaking into history to make His will prevail among us and to destroy the sovereignty of Satan. To "enter" God's kingdom (Mk 10:15) is to bow to His will without condition, without reservation. Somewhat simplistically perhaps, to enter the kingdom is to be "saved."²

What stuns us in the Synoptics, what takes our breath away, is that Jesus not only *announces* God's latest intervention in human history; he is that intervention. God now breaks into our story not through a patriarch like Abraham, a liberator like Moses, a prophet like Isaiah, an angel like Raphael. He enters our history through His very own Son, born like us of a woman, the Divine in the skin of David. And Jesus not only proclaims God's kingship; he brings it about—by preaching it yes, but in the last analysis by fixing it to a cross. And one day, Paul promises, at the culmination of history, humankind and all it possesses, "the whole creation" that "has been groaning in travail together until now" (Rom 8:22), even death itself, will be subjected to Christ, "when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (1 Cor 15:24).

A breath-taking panorama, from the powerless *poverello* in Bethlehem, through the thorn-crowned "King of the Jews" (Jn 19:19), to the Lord trailing clouds of glory. But to whom does his kingdom belong? Who enter it? Who, in a word, are "saved"? Jesus' answer is astonishing: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Mk 9:14). Astonishing for two reasons. Astonishing, first, because literally to little children Jesus promised a share in his kingdom. To the "minors in human society."³ To those not old enough to say yes or no to the kingdom. To those whom the Hebrew people would hardly have thought of when imagining the kingdom promised them. To those whom the disciples kept away from Jesus, kept from bothering their busy Teacher, kept from interfering with his "real" ministry. "Let the children come to me..."

More astonishing still, little children are not only members of Jesus' kingdom; they are "models for all adults who would like to accept it."⁴ What did Jesus see in children that might commend them as paradigms? What childlike qualities should characterize candidates for the kingdom? Well, little children are refreshingly fresh, not faded and jaded by the years. They are open rather than cynical, delighted to be surprised. They are rarely if ever suspicious. And—very pertinent here—the little ones can only receive, can only respond spontaneously to love and affection. They have no claim to achievement,

nothing can they claim proudly as their own.

Oh yes, if you want to turn analytic, you can counter all this with the other side of the coin. Children can churn out all the bad qualities opposed to St. Paul's paeon to love in 1 Corinthians 13. They can be *impatient* and *unkind*, jealous and boastful, arrogant and rude, irritable and resentful; they can love little and endure nothing; they can be noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. But if you play child psychologist, you will miss the point of the comparison. To enter the kingdom, to accept the dominion of Jesus, is not to lapse into second childhood, to mewl and squall, to grouch and grouse, to reproduce the baby and the adolescent. It is to recapture—but now in adult fashion and in the face of God—the openness and nakedness, the sheer receptivity and utter dependence, that called out to a compassionate Christ, that made him see in children what he wants to see in all his disciples.

II

Which leads into my second question: What might Jesus be saying to his disciples now? The disciples I have in mind at the moment are not *all* who follow Christ, not the whole Church, not the total community of disciples. I mean specifically this select group in front of me. Select not because you are destined to ride high in the Christian saddle, above your fellow disciples. You will indeed be ordained; but sacramental ordination will simply expand what sacramental baptism initiated: You will be disciples of the Lord with fresh responsibilities. You are indeed chosen by the community to be its official representatives, to act in the name of Christ and the Church; but not representatives in lordship, only in service. Service in proclaiming the word, in forming community, in presiding at worship, in serving that for which your priesthood exists: the human person.

In this context, 44 years of priesting have finally convinced me: Jesus was right on target! For your ministry and mine, one quality is indispensable: We have to become like children before God. My service to God's people is not primarily psychological—the stunning effect of my powerful personality on the motley mob. I may be incomparably keen of mind and strong of will, a workaholic and wondrous weaver of words. I may, as Paul put it, "have prophetic powers, understand all mysteries and all knowledge, have all faith, so as to remove mountains" (1 Cor 13:2). But if I am not naked before my God, if I do not live my ministry totally dependent on His power and mercy, I run two radical risks: My people may not be fed with Christ, and I may become a castaway.

This is not ivory-tower speculation or pious pap. Such has been my experience—at times devastating. My low moments in ministry? When *I* took first place, and Christ retreated to second. When I imagined that *I* was changing minds and hearts, and forgot Jesus' pungent affirmation: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). When I prided myself that my homily had turned a sinner from his hellish ways, and did not heed Augustine's insight: "If we but turn to God, that itself is a gift of God." When I ceased formal prayer or espoused an ambiguous "To work is to pray." When I was no longer honest with God, but played games with Him, with myself, pretended to a holiness I did not possess. When my response to the urgings of the Spirit echoed the Athenians' reaction to Paul: "I'll listen to you some other time" (cf. Acts 17:32).

No, good friends. Whether at an altar with the God-man in your hands or in a pulpit with his word on your lips, whether shaping a whole community or fashioning a single disciple, whether feeding faith or struggling for justice, the most important aspect of your

ministry is a childlike receptivity. If it is always God who takes the initiative in salvation, it is perilous for a priest to act the "adult," the rugged individualist, the man who "has it made," has the world by the tail.

Of this I can assure you: You will experience your deepest satisfaction and profoundest influence as a priest when you let God lead you like a child, take you wherever *He* wants to, take you even where you may be reluctant to go—a Jerusalem, a Gethsemane, a Calvary not of your choosing. Remember Jesus' prediction to Peter: "...when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go" (Jn 21:18). It is a Christian image that holds for all ages, not just for old age.

Let the Lord lead you. To a thriving cathedral or St. Martinon-the-Rocks. To a people who pour libations to your gifts of nature and of grace, or a people happy to tune you out. To a pastor open to your wisdom on word and sacrament, or an autocrat who knows exactly what Jesus had in mind for his parish. To glowing good health that improves your preaching as well as your golf, or a cancer that cripples your service and your spirit. To changes in the Church that charm you or chill you, challenge you or crucify you. All of this, and so much more, can be grist to your ministry—especially the passion in your priesting—if you are persuaded with St. Paul that you are strongest when you are weakest, because then you are letting God do the work of God. Not an unchristian quietism; simply that all your activity is rooted in Christ, your every gesture enfolded in the hand of God.

Last Tuesday, October 1st, a supreme stylist died at 86 of Alzheimer's disease. For half a century E. B. White had profoundly influenced the writing of American English. Not only by pieces in the *New Yorker* and children's books that are classics, but by a deathless best seller on style that a homilist disregards only at peril to his preaching. As a *Times* obituary put it, White "never wrote a...careless sentence."⁵ As we close this day for seminarians, I commend to you two gifts from E. B. White. Specifically for your preaching, his *Elements of Style*. More generally for your priesthood, in harmony with today's Gospel, his short poem "Conch":

Hold a baby to your ear
As you would a shell:
Sounds of centuries you hear
New centuries foretell.
Who can break a baby's code?
And which is the older
The listener or his small load?
The held or the holder?⁶

Yes, dear priests-to-be, if you would enter the kingdom of God and help others enter, if you want passionately to play priest and not God, disciple and not master, "hold a baby to your ear."

From *Lovely in Eyes Not His* © 1988 Paulist Press.