

September 19, 2021
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Wisdom 2:12, 17-20
James 3:16-4:3
Mark 9:30-37

The other day I was talking with a young, engaged couple about marriage. There are always so many decisions to be made in planning a wedding. But, at the end of the day, there are really only a few critically important decisions.

For the groom, in my opinion, the most important decision is the choice of a best man. In the culture in which I was raised, your best man is that one best friend from your current life who you can trust unreservedly to pass you into the arms of your new best friend with whom you will journey through the rest of your life. The best man's job is to help you leave your known life behind in order to embrace your new and uncertain life as a married man. In a sense, the role of the best man is sacrificial, letting go of a friend so that friend can grow in relationship with another.

In this context, the choice of a best man is not to be taken lightly. I suspect for many it is a difficult, if not agonizing, choice. For me, the choice was easy. I chose my father. He was the best of my best friends, even though he was 40 years older than me.

The problem with having a best friend 4 decades older who is also your father is that the time for "the talk" arrives far too early in life. No, I'm not speaking of the sex talk.

I'm speaking of the approaching end of life talk.

I'll never forget the day my father sat me down for the first time to instruct me about such things as living wills, medical decisions, funeral wishes, insurance, assets, money, the house, etc., etc., etc. Of course, I understood, but I didn't want to understand. And so I just listened—took no notes; asked no questions. I just listened hoping that the talk would end as quickly as it had begun. Instead of stepping up to the responsibilities that my father—my best friend—needed me to embrace, I was selfishly absorbed in self-pity over what my life might be like if Dad were no longer around.

I think that is exactly how the apostles were feeling after Jesus confides in them that He will predecease them. In my period of self-pity, I went into a funk of denial. It seems the apostles, in trying to comprehend the practical implications of Jesus' end of life talk for their own lives, reacted with each trying to position himself for leadership. They became like squabbling siblings, exhibiting the selfish ambition condemned by St James in today's second reading. Mark describes them as arguing.

Jesus uses this as a teaching moment, explaining that real leaders must be servant leaders: "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all."

Using a child as an example is a particularly poignant demonstration by Jesus, especially considering the culture and mores of first century Israel. In that time and place, infant mortality was 30%. 60% of children were dead by age 16. While our culture demands that we place children first and risk everything to preserve a child's life above all else, ancient near east cultures placed the child last because he or she was not likely to survive anyway. For example, in a house fire or other disaster a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, then his wife. Children came last. In times of famine, adults were fed first—children last.

So, children had no social status, essentially little more than slaves until they reached adulthood, commonly considered 16 years of age. By exhorting His disciples to embrace a child, and by physically demonstrating it, Jesus is showing His disciples that true humility—true leadership—requires embracing the lowest of the low and placing them above ourselves.

Who—or what—are the lowest of the low in our lives that we find impossible to embrace—impossible to even contemplate serving? What could it be about each of us that someone else finds impossible to embrace?

This is, indeed, a hard gospel that raises hard questions. This is not one of those feel-good gospels about Jesus' mercy and healing. This is a tough love gospel. Jesus' call to servant leadership is much more than the modern cliches of upside-down pyramids and making sure that others have what they need. Of course, Jesus calls us to those things—but He also asks much more. He shows us in today's gospel that we must embrace the uncomfortable, even the disgusting, in order to be the last of all and the servant of all. Picture Mother Teresa.

Impossible, you say? Certainly, it's impossible for us. But with the help of God—if we pray for His help—we might just make a little progress in our lives. Look at the progress the Apostles ultimately made.

Dear Lord, please be my Best Man. Lead me from my known and comfortable life into the relationships you need me to foster for the growth and benefit of Your Kingdom. Help me to embrace those You need me to embrace and who need my embrace, not just those I choose to embrace. Amen.