

Homily - Revealed to Infants

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When I was growing up two of my great grandmothers were still alive. They both died a few weeks from one another when I was ten years old.

One of them had a bird in a cage that sat beside her chair. This great grandmother wasn't very mobile and she would sit in her chair next to a large picture window with the bird in a cage to keep her company.

The other great grandmother was more mobile and as children we interacted with her a bit more. This great grandmother gave us each bird nicknames. She called me the Cardinal, that distinctive red bird with black on its face and a crest on its head. As a child the Cardinal was the bird that I learned to sketch or draw.

As I got older I didn't pay much attention to birds. They faded into the noise of everyday living. But, to this day, the Cardinal is still my bird.

My husband, Jeff, is a wildlife biologist, and I think it is fascinating that he had classes in grad school on birds. Jeff is the one that told me about the bird acronym, LBJ. LBJ stand for little brown job, and the acronym it true for most of us. For most of us birds are LBJ's. Birds are little brown jobs. We can't tell or don't notice the differences among them. They just all blend together. As an adult I have spent many years without noticing birds. For me, most of them are just LBJ's.

All of us go through phases or stages of life, and for me I had a stage of life in which I paid attention to birds, and I have had a long stage of life as an adult in which I didn't even notice birds.

Many have written about the stages or phases of life. The best known book was written in 1981 by James Fowler. Yes his name is Fowler, a person who hunts birds. Be that as it may, James Fowler wrote his book *Stages of Faith*. Ken Wilber gave us another framework for the stages of life in his book *Integral Spirituality*. Some of you may have read or studied about the stages as presented by Fowler or Wilber. There is a lot to learn from these two authors, but today I want to look at the stages of life as brought to us in today's Gospel lesson.

Today's Gospel reading is about stages of life. At the beginning of the passage, Jesus points out the immature complaints of children. Then, he shakes his head at the perversity of adults who complained about John, but when Jesus did they opposite of

John these adults complained about Jesus as well. For some adults, one can never do anything right.

And, then Jesus goes on to call out some supposedly wise and intelligent adults who just don't seem to be able to understand or accept what Jesus is teaching about God and about the spiritual journey. Sometimes our brains and intellect get in the way of experiencing and knowing God.

And then Jesus compares these supposedly intelligent adults to those adults who have achieved the simplicity of infants. Through Jesus, these "simple" people are the blessed ones who come to know God. This last group of peoples, the people who have achieved simple stage of life, are the role models for the rest of us. Jesus teaches us that God want us to have a simple life.

This is a message that is still relevant to us in twenty-first century America. To our detriment we overly complicate many things in life. We overly complicate things in ways that moves us away from the wisdom of God. We overly complicate things so that we can feel a sense of control and sense of superiority over others. We overly complicate things because it gives us the answers we want rather than answers that are of God.

Instead, according to today's Gospel reading, we are to be as naïve as infants. Or more specifically we are to move out of the complexity of being an adult, and into a state of second naiveté. It seems we all begin in naiveté and eventually return to a "second naiveté" or simplicity, whether willingly or on our deathbeds. This blessed simplicity is calm, knowing, patient, inclusive, and self-forgetful. Second naiveté helps us move beyond anger, alienation, and ignorance. And, I believe this second naiveté is the very goal of mature adulthood and mature religion. I believe that God wants us to enjoy a simple faith.

Now, during his lifetime Jesus was quite focused on one simple thing. He was dedicated to doing the will of God. To Jesus it was that simple. As we grow spiritually, our lives become more and more centered and simple. There are only a few things that matter, and eventually really only one. Follow the will of God. Or, put another way, follow the pleasure of God.

Howard Thurman was the esteemed theologian and spiritual teacher to Martin Luther King, Jr. In his book *Meditations of the Heart*, Thurman wrote the following about the will or pleasure of God. "The central element in communion with God is the act of self-surrender. [Thus,] the symbol of my prayer this day is the open heart.... I surrender myself to God without any conditions or reservations. I shall not bargain with [God]. I shall not make my surrender piecemeal but I shall lay bare the very

center of me, that all of my very being shall be charged with the creative energy of God. Little by little, or vast area by vast area, my life must be transmuted in the life of God. As this happens, I come into the meaning of true freedom and the burdens that I seemed unable to bear are floated in the current of the life and love of God.

True freedom is to follow the will or pleasure of God. That is a simple message that is especially relevant to us on the July 4th weekend.

On this weekend in which we celebrate our wonderful country, I can choose to keep those other people out. But, I doubt that is the will of God.

On this weekend in which we dream of the people we can become, I can choose to protect and keep what is mine, but I doubt that is the will of God.

On this weekend in which we celebrate our freedom, I can fight anyone who ever tells me to wear a mask, but I doubt that is the will of God. I can choose to protect my privileges and everyone else, be damned. But, I doubt that is the will of God.

In my experience, the fullest freedom I have ever known, the greatest sense of security, comes from abandoning my will to do the will of God. Jesus calls us to this second naiveté or simplicity of life. Again, this blessed simplicity is calm, knowing, patient, inclusive, and self-forgetful. Again, second naiveté helps us move beyond anger, alienation, and ignorance. And, I believe this second naiveté is the very goal of mature adulthood and mature religion. I believe that God wants us to enjoy a simple faith.

How often do we take a deep breath and appreciate—really appreciate—the air we breathe? How often do we savor the food we taste and smell the flowers along our pathway? When was the last time we listened to a child, laughed with a friend, embraced our spouse? It is true that the best things in life are free, but we are often too distracted or too busy to see the simple treasure of God's pleasures that are right in front of us.

Let me share poem by Russian biologist and poet Anna Akhmatova that I think shares this sentiment. The poem is called "I Taught Myself to Live Simply."

I taught myself to live simply and wisely,
to look at the sky and pray to God,
and to wander long before evening
to tire my superfluous worries.
When the burdocks rustle in the ravine
and the yellow-red rowanberry cluster droops

I compose happy verses
about life's decay, decay and beauty.
I come back. The fluffy cat
licks my palm, purrs so sweetly
and the fire flares bright
on the saw-mill turret by the lake.
Only the cry of a stork landing on the roof
occasionally breaks the silence.

During the last four months, during our time of shelter at home, many of us have been forced to lead a simple life. Perhaps this simplicity is a blessing in which we can be present with and notice the things that surround us. And, during these times, I have had many conversations with some of you about birds. Many of us are noticing the birds that are all around us. Some speculate that fewer cars and planes have allowed the birds to thrive. Others guess that we have just slowed down enough to notice, and to notice that most of the birds are not LBJ's. I would like to think that I have left behind one stage of life and have entered another stage of my spiritual life in which birds have become more important again.

And, like my great grandmother, I've tried to give our grandson, Carter, a bird name. For him it is the snowy owl. I was the Cardinal, and Carter can be the snowy owl. May you also be in a stage of your spiritual journey in which you notice the birds.