

Homily for January 14 2017

Angela was still a pre-schooler the Christmas Grandpa Harvey got her the red Radio Flyer wagon, and by summer it had become a popular item in the family's backyard. When her younger sister learned to toddle along sometime later they made a game of pulling each other, often with the help of Mom or Dad.

As is known to happen with siblings, one afternoon the cooperative play turned competitive, then became a heated argument. And so it was that Angela informed her little sister in a physical way that this was indeed her little red wagon, and hers alone. Before their parents could intervene the whole matter was succinctly solved. "Don't cry. It's okay," Angela declared to her sobbing sister with absolute confidence. "I'll just tell Grandpa, and he'll buy you a wagon, too."

Now little red wagons are not a dime a dozen, and Grandpa Harvey was not known to be a doting grandparent, nor was it his habit to lavish toys willy-nilly — even upon his grandchildren. In all her four years of living, Angela had never once asked him for anything more than to sit on his lap, but when the story made its rounds amidst the family grapevine her words of trust found their mark. And as if on cue, her prophecy was fulfilled and a second little red wagon found its way into the backyard, courtesy of Grandpa Harvey. For Grandpa, it was a matter of honor.

Absolute dependence and absolute trust, combined with a penchant for shameless petitioning — that pretty much describes the spirit of early childhood. Then, somewhere along the way, things change. Sometimes we get rebuked and scolded; some of us get neglected or abused — and we stop trusting. Sometimes we are made to feel ashamed of our need, and we stop asking. We learn, "I can do that myself," and we are expected to do just that, and we stop depending.

Somewhere along the line we stop asking and we start demanding. We stop believing in others' generosity, and we start fending for ourselves. We stop trusting and we start manipulating; we stop begging and we start earning. It's called growing up and, for the most part, growing up is a good thing — but sad in a way, too.

Odd, isn't it, that our healthy physical and emotional growth toward maturity involves moving from infantile dependence to adult autonomy; but our spiritual maturation requires movement in the opposite direction? Those to whom we would point as saintly, or "perfected in faith," display as the hallmark of their lives a total trust in God's providence, a recognition of their own absolute dependence upon that providence, and the intimacy to "take it to the Lord in prayer." Growing up spiritually means that we live before God in the same condition that we

entered the human realm — exposed, helpless, and crying out for what we need. Getting to that place is the journey of a lifetime.

It is this theme that the writer of Hebrews is accentuating today.

We are called to a holy transparency and holy boldness.

We are to approach Holy Scripture with the kind of transparency like that of a little child who when they are convicted of a wrong doing have not yet cultivated the sophisticated deception of being good liars and so they fess up. For us, we should approach scripture with the kind of honesty that a child expresses in front of their loving but truth revealing parent. So the writer says:

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edge sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge thoughts and intentions.

The writer piles up phrases to show how penetrating it is. It penetrates to the division of soul and spirit. In Greek, the *psuchē*, the soul, is the essence of life. All living things possess *psuchē*; it is physical life. In Greek, the *pneuma*, the spirit, is that which is characteristic of human beings. It is by spirit that we think and reason and look beyond the earth to God. It is as if the writer to the Hebrews were saying that the word of God tests our earthly life and our spiritual existence. He says that the word of God scrutinizes our desires and intentions. Thoughts (*enthumēsis*) is the emotional part, and intention (*ennoia*) is the intellectual part of every individual. It is as if he said: 'Your emotional and intellectual life must both be submitted to the scrutiny of God.'¹

As we live with this kind of holy transparency we can in turn live with holy boldness.

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with holy boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The writer says we can approach Jesus this way because we know him to be able to sympathize with us in our own weaknesses because he has been tested like us in every respect, yet without sin. Because he is sympathetic and penetrating in his relationship with us, we like Angela who boldly approached her Grandpa can in turn approach Jesus confidently and with a humble transparency grow in complete dependency on Jesus.

¹ Barclay, W. (2002). *The Letter to the Hebrews* (p. 47). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.