

Word of Life
August 2021

“Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:4)

Who is the greatest: who is the most powerful? Who is the ‘winner’ in society, in the Church, in politics or in the world of finance?

This question runs through relationships, guides choices, and determines strategies. It is the dominant logic to which we may inadvertently resort when trying to ensure positive and efficient outcomes for those around us.

Here the Gospel of Matthew presents us with Jesus’ disciples. They have accepted the announcement of the kingdom of heaven and want to know what will be required of them if they are to be leaders of the new people of God: ‘Who is the greatest?’

In response, Jesus makes one of his unpredictable gestures: he places a child in the middle of the small crowd. And he accompanies this gesture with unequivocal words:

Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus contrasts a competitive and self-sufficient mentality with the weakest and most vulnerable element in society - the person who has no role to boast about or defend, and who is totally dependent on others and spontaneously relies on their help.

However, this is not an invitation to be passive or to avoid proactive and responsible behavior: it is a freely taken act of the will. Jesus invites us to ‘become small’ to be child-like, and this requires intention and commitment from us if we are to make a decisive change.

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This is how Focolare founder, Chiara Lubich, describes in a passage in October 2003 a child of the Gospel: ‘... children trustingly abandon themselves to their father and mother: they believe in their love. ... Authentic Christians, like children, believe in God’s love and abandon themselves into the arms of their heavenly Father, placing unfailing trust in him.

“Children depend on their parents for everything ... We too, “children of the Gospel,” depend on the Father for everything: ... he knows what we need, even before we ask him, and he gives it to us. The kingdom of God is not a reality to conquer and win but a gift to receive from the hands of the Father.”

Chiara emphasizes how children entrust themselves totally to their father and learns everything from him. In the same way: “The ‘evangelical child’ puts everything in God’s mercy and, forgetting the past, begins a new life every day, which is open to the promptings of the Spirit and is always creative. Children cannot learn to speak on their own, they need someone to teach them. The disciple of Jesus ... learns everything from the Word of God to the point of speaking and living according to the Gospel.

Children tend to imitate their parents. “So, the child of the Gospel ... loves everyone because the Father makes his sun rise on the wicked and on the good, and makes it rain on the just and on the unjust’. This child is the first to love because the Father loved us when we were still sinners; the child loves gratuitously, without interest because the heavenly Father does so.’ⁱ

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In Colombia, Vicente and his family experienced the challenges of the pandemic, under a very strict quarantine regime. He writes, “When the curfew started, daily life changed abruptly. My wife and two older children had to prepare for some university exams; the youngest could not get used to online learning. No one in the house had time to take care of anyone else.

“This chaos was on the verge of exploding when I realized it was an

opportunity to embody the art of loving in our ‘new life’ according to the Gospel. I set about tidying the kitchen, preparing food, and organizing meals. I am not an experienced cook, nor precise in my cleaning, but I realized that this would help to reduce the tensions of everyday life.

“What started out as an act of love for one day multiplied over several months. Other members of the family began to do the cleaning, tidying and putting things away whenever they finished their work. Together we saw that the words of the Gospel are true, and that creative love suggests how to put everything else in order.”