

ORDINARY SUNDAY XV “B”  
SEPTEMBER 22/23, 2018

This weekend’s readings from the letter of St. James and the Gospel scene from St. Mark could not be more timely. Recent weeks revelations of the crime of the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults by priests and bishops, and the duplicitous life of a former Cardinal, subsequent mishandling of these accusations by bishops, have left all of us shocked, saddened, disheartened and angry. At its core, the crime of sexual abuse perpetrated by anyone, like all abuse, is an egregious act of power and authority.

Today’s second reading from the letter of James exposes the roots of all abuse. ***“Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice”*** (Jas. 3:16). Today’s Gospel finds the disciples arguing among themselves as to who among them is the greatest—a power struggle; raw careerism (in church terms, clericalism), a scourge Pope Francis has decried from the beginning of his papacy.

In the Kingdom of God Jesus has established, power is found not in domination, but in service. The last are first. The supposed first (or those we hold up for adulation as the “firsts” in the world, and the Church) are called to be the last. The image of Jesus embracing a child is telling. In the first century, children possessed no rights under law. Biblically, a child was used by the writers as a symbolic representative of all disenfranchised persons in society: the orphan, widow, disabled, poor. It is these “little ones”—voiceless, powerless, neglected and abandoned who are to be the focus of our concern, our use of power in the model of Jesus.

Spending time with friends at Lake Okobogi early in August, one of them shared with me the eulogy his brother delivered at his father’s funeral. His late father was a Methodist minister. Written from memories of his childhood he titled it: ***Going Last***.

*How I hated it: going last. Standing at the end of the line where we’d arrived in a strange church basement full of people I did not know. “Oh, Rev. Sieck,” they’d say, “you’re here. Now*

*we can begin. You go to the head of the line, you, you and your family. Go on now. Go ahead so we can start.”*

*I'd charge ahead, spying the pie, only to be held back by you. “No,” you'd say to them, “You go ahead. We'll go back here.” And you'd steer us to the end of the line, and with you we'd go last, and finally arrive at the table with the remaining food and empty pans and bowls. Just a little Jello or casserole here or there, the best pie and cake long gone.*

*I didn't understand it, a boy needing to move forward into the world, seeing myself in the lead. I didn't want to stand at the end of anything. ...*

*Going last had become familiar ground to you. When your peers, the one with pulpit style, the hot shot with the red convertible, the jokester, the Ph.D. moved ahead of you, you were content to go last. Driving lonely the endless rough roads, you'd meet your flock in the fields, in the farmyard, in the kitchen. After your brief unhappy foray into a city church, you were comfortable back in the small churches, the rural churches, even if they required travelling from place to place on Sundays.*

*And we'd go to those church basements for the dinners—and follow the farm families—and go last.*

*You believed in going last, not putting yourself ahead of anyone, staying back, standing with the isolated, the odd, the lonely, the addicted. It was an article of faith for you; it was what God wanted of you. Staying back and going last was your way of serving God, an “inferiority complex” as you once said, the heart of your commitment to your Lord. ...*

*The God you served passes all our understanding, and is greater even than you knew: Flipping the order, loving the least, the lost, the last.*

*Your gift to God was going last—to the God who gives wisdom to the foolish, voice to the voiceless, power to the weak, and makes the last go first.*

