

In my years of priesthood, I've been blessed to be in the presence of children—their energies, their joy—whether it's at our school, or children that are here on Sundays. We are blessed to have the presence of children in the parish and would be sorely lacking otherwise. But sometimes I'm surprised by things I hear things children say and behaviors I witness, perhaps especially behaviors that we don't generally regard as so innocent, those we don't expect from children.

I remember a few years ago, a 2nd grader, asking me, *"Hey, Father, what kind of phone do you have?"* I didn't realize that an Android phone was the wrong answer, as he was quick to respond, *"You should get an iPhone because they're better"*. It clearly had not occurred to him that I wasn't seeking his guidance, but more to the point, I recall thinking, *"How is it, a 7-year-old is an expert on smartphones, and asserts his expertise with a rather cavalier attitude?"* My guess is that he was echoing something he heard his mom or dad say.

I also remember an awkward occasion with a family. The father and the twelve-year-old son thought they were being funny, making cutting remarks about the mother, who tried not to convey her hurt at the disrespect that came from her son, as her husband not only allowed it, but even made further light of it. *Where did the son learn that behavior?*

Lest it sound as though I'm only an innocent party to all this, many years ago, I was in the car with my oldest nephew, who was around three or four years old—just the two of us. At some point, in a moment of exasperation regarding another person's erratic driving, I said a word I shouldn't have, especially with him present. I had foolishly assumed that he wouldn't recognize the word. A voice from the backseat announced, *"That's a bad word"*. Guilty, as charged. We think that they aren't watching, that their innocent minds won't pick it up, but that's too often not the case.

It was in last Sunday's Gospel, in which the disciples were caught disputing who among them was the greatest, that Jesus sought to get their minds in the right place by directing their attention to a child (Mark 9:36), symbolizing innocence, carefree attitudes. Only a few verses later, still in teaching-mode with his disciples, and still holding the child before them, he said, as we heard in today's Gospel, *"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better if you were thrown into the sea"*—rather harsh language, from one we typically associate with gentleness and mercy. Jesus seems to be saying, *It's one thing to choose sin for yourself, but it is so much worse to lead innocent ones to sin.*

*So, what about our little ones?* Our children may not be actively focused on our every word and action, but nonetheless, they're passively absorbing it, learning from us—even in the moments that it might seem their attention is immersed in other things: TV programs, mobile devices, gaming systems. They're learning from us, from our choices, even from behind the closed door of their bedroom.

For sure, at a certain age, their peers become a powerful influence, but it would be foolish to think they aren't learning from their parents, grandparents, all of us—from the time before they begin to speak, and even when they reach the age that they realize they know everything, and their parents know nothing.

What are we teaching them when we cut corners, and cheat in any way; when we justify or explain-away our bad behaviors; when we gossip about others; when we call other drivers idiots; when we speak disrespectfully about authority figures in our children's lives: coaches, teachers, parents of other children; when we take God's name in vain, using it in anger; when we argue and fight in front of them, sometimes throwing insults; when we demonstrate that sports are more important than Mass?

*"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better if you were thrown into the sea"*. I don't believe Jesus wants us to be thrown into the sea, but he clearly wants us to cultivate virtue and goodness in our children.

In the same way, I don't believe Jesus wants us to cut off our hands or pluck out our eyes, as we hear in today's Gospel. His point is that he wants us to cut out the things in our life that perpetuate sin in our lives. I know for myself, the stuff that continues to feed my bad behaviors, my bad attitudes, my struggles with sin. *Do you know yours? Could you make a list of one, two, or three things—attitudes, habits, things in our lives that feed into your struggles with sin—that if you*

*cut them out, you might find freedom at last?* We must cut it out of our lives, especially in any way we want to model virtue and goodness for our children or for those over whom we hold influence. Until we do, we can't expect better from others, especially our little ones. After all, they learn it from us.