

January 22, 2018 6:00 p.m. St. Augustine Cathedral
“Giving Thanks to God for the Gift of Human Life”

(Is.49:1-6; Matthew 18:1-5,10,12-14)

On the occasion of the 45th anniversary of Roe v. Wade

“Who’s the greatest?” That’s a question we seem to ask in various ways all the time, doesn’t it? Who’s # 1? Who’s the best? the greatest? the most super? After yesterday’s AFC and NFC Championship Games, we now know that the Philadelphia “Eagles” and the New England “Patriots” will be going to the Super Bowl, and in less than 2 weeks, will answer that question as to which team is the most “super” in all of professional Football--at least for this year.

In a way, that was the same question “the disciples” asked Jesus in today’s Gospel passage when they approached Jesus and asked: “*Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?*” There’s something in that question that makes me think that the disciples half-way expected Jesus to say to them: “Well YOU are! You’re the greatest disciples I’ve ever had!---You’re the most amazing disciples there could EVER be!---You’re the Super Bowl Champs of all Discipleship!” But, of course, if that’s what they were expecting, they were sorely disappointed----perhaps even shocked----at what Jesus actually answered. Because as we heard, Jesus first called a child to Him----placed His hand on the child, and said: “*Whoever becomes as humble as this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven!*”

I’m pretty sure that’s an answer no one saw coming. Who would think that a child is the greatest in any category? Especially in those days---since children were not seen as having any value at all.

Jesus consistently challenges us to “see” things as He sees them---and when we do that, we “see” a whole different reality than what our human/limited vision might initially lead us. To be clear, Jesus didn’t say that being a child was the greatest. Listen once again: “*Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.*”

What makes a child “humble”? Perhaps it’s the realization that, as a child, they are dependent on others---that there are many things that they can’t do---that they make lots of mistakes and need to ask forgiveness and even, at times, be disciplined. Maybe that quality of “humility” is the reality that they don’t know everything there is to know, which is why they go to

school and are always learning new things. Maybe it's the realization that they are a "work in progress" as their bodies, their minds, their emotions, and their souls grow, get stronger and become healthier. Or maybe it is the Child's ability to dream big, even if it's way beyond the realm of possibility!

When we get all grown up, we might have a tendency to think we're done "growing"---that we have nothing more to learn---that we know all there is to know---that we are the "masters of our destiny"---that we don't have anyone to answer to!

So, really Jesus answers the question about "*Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven*" by saying that the one who knows his own deficiencies, weaknesses, limitations and failings, yet turns to God to seek His strengths, graces, guidance and mercy is the greatest! Or as Jesus Himself told us: "*Unless you turn (to God...unless you turn (away from sin, away from pride) and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.*"

But then, Jesus then gives us a beautiful image of God's Love for each of us! Jesus asks His disciples their opinion: "*If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray?*" Once more, Jesus "sees" things very differently than we do. The pragmatic answer---or the answer that a realist might give--to that question would be: if you leave the 99, you run the risk of them running off too, or the risk that someone might come and steal some of them, so it's probably better to "cut your losses" and write that "one" off as a lost cause.

But no---not in Jesus' way of seeing reality! Jesus challenges us to "see" each sheep-----each person----as God sees them----as God sees US! What was Jesus' conclusion?: "*It is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost.*"

And yet.....and yet...Here we are for the 45th time since those fatal Supreme Court decisions in 1973 of *Roe v. Wade* and shortly after that, *Doe v. Bolton* which legalized abortions in this country. Over these 45 years, there have been more than 58 million abortions performed with the approval of the highest court in our land. That figure represents much more than very disturbing statistics. Those are 58 million people!

We're all against wars and violence. Do you realize that if you add up all the deaths of U.S. military personnel in all the major wars since the American Revolution----that's over a period of 242 years----there were approximately 1.1 million lives lost. As awful as that is, there have been over 58 million lives lost in 45 years---58 times as many deaths in 1/6 of the time! That is truly a sin against humanity.

And yet.....and yet, our country states that the rights of the baby don't matter; that the right of the mother to decide is the only right that matters.

In this evening's First Reading, we heard Isaiah the Prophet beautifully reflecting on his own "calling" by God to be His Prophet by saying: "*The Lord called me from birth; from my mother's womb He gave me my name....For now the Lord has spoken Who formed me as His servant from the womb.*" Isaiah had the insight to know that we are known, loved and valued by God from the first moment of our conception in our mother's womb, and that God has a plan for each of us, not just Isaiah, but for each and every person.

God had a plan for each of those 58 million babies who were killed in their mother's wombs, which should be the safest place in the world.

The Church designates this day as a Day of Prayer for the full restoration of the legal guarantee of the right to life and a Day of Penance for violations to the dignity of the human person committed through acts of abortion. That's what we are doing here today. But... we need to do more. We need to be strong in our convictions. We need to speak up and stand against a culture, which Pope St. John Paul called "a culture of death", which doesn't blink an eye as every hour of every day innocent babies are being killed.

We can take some small comfort in the fact that abortions seem to be on the decrease. We can be pleased about the fact that the March for Life in Washington, D.C. continues to draw huge numbers of people to witness against abortion and to advocate to our national legislators, as took place this past Friday, with many of our own people---and mostly young people by the way----participating. We can be grateful that just yesterday, a small, but committed, group of Christians of all different denominations gathered in Bronson Park, with the participation of 8 local Protestant ministers and me to pray and witness to Life.

Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, in his recent Apostolic Exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel” had this to say about this most basic right to life:
“Among the vulnerable for whom the Church wishes to care with particular love and concern are unborn children, the most defenseless and innocent among us.”

But then, he went on to make this grave warning: *“(The) defense of unborn life is closely linked to the defense of each and every other human right. It involves the conviction that a human being is always sacred and inviolable, in any situation and at every stage of development.....Once this conviction disappears, so do solid and lasting foundations for the defense of human rights which would always be subject to the passing whims of the powers that be.” (#213)*

In other words, when we as a society refuse to stand up for the rights of the most vulnerable and most innocent, the remainder of our human rights are truly in jeopardy.

Pope Francis’ warning is consistent with Jesus’ warning that we heard in this evening’s Gospel passage: *“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the Face of My Heavenly Father.”*

Jesus always challenges us to “see” things as He sees reality. We might like to think that we are the “masters of our own destiny”----we might like to think that we’re the “greatest” or the “best” or the most “super” all on our own. But, as Jesus tells us, the only thing that makes us truly “great” is when, **in all humility**, we realize that we are only able to find our way through this Life when we unite ourselves to God, and let His grace give us strength---when we let His Love give us value and worth---when we let His mercy forgive us and change our hearts so that we can stand up and raise our voices to protect and value all human life from the first moment of conception until the final natural breath.

We are truly great when we can say, with this evening’s Psalm Refrain:
“O Lord, our God, how wonderful Your Name in all the earth!”
 May God bless us, and may God help us, now and always.