

Homily based on the readings from July 30, 2023 (1 Kings 3:5, 7-12; Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 13:44-52)

It is difficult – perhaps impossible – for human beings to imagine how God perceives us. The best image I can think of – particularly after having children myself – is that, from God’s perspective, we all look like toddlers. God loves each one of us unconditionally, but he is completely justified in not trusting our wisdom or our judgment.

While there are some exceptions, most very young children do not possess the ability to foresee the obvious consequences of their actions. They are fundamentally unable to make the simplest connections – that eating too much candy will give them a stomach ache or that staying up too late will make them grouchy the next day. (Believe me, it does.)

When something goes badly, since they cannot take accountability for themselves, they tend to blame the authority figures around them – their parents, their grandparents, their teachers. While the temper tantrums of

a three-year-old are exhausting, they can also be somewhat endearing.

We hope they grow out of that phase, though – as quickly as possible.

The average adult certainly has a greater sense of cause and effect than a typical toddler. (Again, there may be a few exceptions.) Nevertheless, as finite beings dwelling within the vastness of God's created order, our perspective is severely limited. We may think we want certain things, but we have very little sense for what would happen if we actually received them.

Fortunately for us, God – the wisest of Fathers – is not going to give us what we think we want, simply because we ask for it. He responds to all our prayers, but it may be the response of a parent whose child has just demanded cotton candy for breakfast. In some cases, he may give us what we ask for – perhaps even so we can learn a lesson – but he will never give us anything that is fundamentally damaging or destructive.

The question for us, then, is how we can know what we should be praying for, what we ought to be asking from God. Even if we will always be toddlers in God's eyes, we should still be trying to grow, to develop, to mature.

Today's reading from the Old Testament provides a good starting point. Solomon, the King of Israel, was given the opportunity to ask God for anything he wanted. Most people – even most good people – would likely have asked for something that would make their own lives better: robust health, financial prosperity, personal security. On the surface, there may be nothing wrong with those requests – but we cannot say for certain that they would align with God's plan for our lives. Solomon asks for something different, something better. His request, “an understanding heart to judge [the] people and to distinguish right from wrong,” is not intended to benefit himself. He is asking for the gift that will allow him to provide the greatest service to the people in his care. That is the request of a Godly person, the request of someone who follows Christ's command not to be served but to serve.

In this respect, Solomon is an excellent model for all of us to follow. Spend some time reflecting on what gift or talent would allow you to provide the greatest service to the people around you. Try asking God for that and see what happens.

Nevertheless, there is more to this question – how to know what we should be praying for – than simply asking for the opportunity to serve other people. It is an interesting coincidence that [today is also/yesterday was] the Memorial of Saints Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Most of us are probably familiar with the story of the two sisters, Martha and Mary, one of whom was “burdened with much serving” while the other “sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak.” Despite the necessity of the service Martha provided, Christ declared that Mary had “chosen the better part.”

It is instructive to think about this lesson in the context of prayer. Martha’s problem, at least in this instance, was that she had begun to

view the means – the practical service she provided – as being more important than the end – basking in the radiance of Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God. The same issue also pertains to our prayer lives. While we need to pray for practical necessities – particularly those that will allow us to render the greatest service to God’s people – that is not the ultimate purpose of prayer.

In the words of the Catechism, “prayer is the *living relationship* of the children of God with their Father who is good beyond measure, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit” (2565). The *living relationship*. Just as human parents want their children to view them as more than just a source of food and shelter, God wants to be more than just our divine caretaker. He longs for a relationship, a personal relationship, with each of his children. He has planted the seeds of that relationship within each of our hearts. Recall, if you would, the New Testament reading from last weekend:

The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but the Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings.

The Holy Spirit – immeasurable, eternal, and almighty – dwells within each of one of us. He provides not only the words for our prayers, but the very breath with which we utter them. As a starting point for our relationship with God, we must clearly recognize what God has already given us. The pearl of great price is not health, not wealth, and not even wisdom – but a living relationship with our Heavenly Father, who made each of us in his own image and who loves every one of us more deeply than we can possibly imagine.