

About twenty years ago, a thoughtful, rather sad poem entitled - *On Turning Ten* - was published by Billy Collins. It tells the story of a boy leaving early childhood behind, and facing the realities of growing up. And it's not very pleasant! The boy feels like he's coming down with something: "*a kind of measles of the spirit, a mumps of the psyche, a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.*" He describes just how powerful imagination is for the very young. He tells us: "*At four I was an Arabian wizard. I could make myself invisible by drinking a glass of milk a certain way. At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.*" His memories may remind us of our own imaginary childhood fantasies. I remember playing with my cousins as we floated downriver, the couch in the basement as our boat, chasing off the lions and bears that were trying to catch us. Then next thing you know, with swords in hand, we were riding off with Zorro. Individually, we have different memories and will recall different things. But as we grow, something happens to that very, very vivid imagination. It fades, as we face the day-to-day pressures of growing up. As the boy puts it: "*This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself, as I walk through the universe in my sneakers. It's time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends, time to turn my first big number. It seems like only yesterday I thought there was nothing under my skin but light. If you cut me I would shine. But now, when I fall down on the sidewalks of life, I skin my knees. I bleed!*"

Billy Collins' poem captures those first steps from childhood to adulthood; our first inklings that reality ultimately replaces fantasy! They say it usually happens between seven and ten years of age. That time of life when we forego imaginary friends and playtime fantasies and realize that falling down means skinned knees. Fall hard enough, and we might even bleed. Yet those childhood fantasies never completely fade away. They live on, deep within us. And because they do, we grown-ups still hope for that perfect someone, riding up on a white horse, to rescue us from our unpleasant scrapes. We long for that perfect spouse, the perfect child, or a perfect friend. We believe deep in our souls that somewhere out there we'll find that perfect job, with a perfect boss. And maybe it was that type of deep, hopeful longing that we see in the apostles.

There they are with Jesus, the perfect Messiah. They had every expectation that this Jesus, this anointed One of God, would restore Jerusalem to the glory days of King David! And they wanted in. This was their chance for glory by association. So we find them arguing among themselves about who might be greatest. They're very busily walking through the universe in their sneakers. Who will be the Arabian wizard, who the soldier, who the prince? It's almost as if there's nothing under their skins but light! Cut their skin and they'll shine! It's obvious there's a great distance between what they think they know, and what Jesus knows. Jesus knows that when skin is cut, there's going to be blood. So Jesus is blunt! He tells them he will be handed over, killed, and then rise. For the apostles, the message must have been hard to hear, hard to understand, and hard to believe. So Jesus, ever the Teacher, sits down, gathers the twelve, and gently instructs them what it means to be great in the Kingdom of God: "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*" Then taking a child, and putting into their midst, Jesus says: "*Whoever receives one such child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me, but the One who sent me.*"

For Jesus, greatness is not riches, power, honor, or prestige. It's not about becoming great as Arabian wizards and princes are great. Christian greatness challenges us in a profound way. Christian greatness comes from sharing God's love to lift people up. Christian greatness means caring for all people the same way we care for children. Sure there will be first steps, first words, birthdays, and other joyful events. But receiving children is not always sweetness and light. Receiving a child also means mumps, measles, and chicken pox. And sooner or later, it means walking with them through the skinned knees, tears, and blood that inevitably occur when they fall down on the sidewalks of life. And it doesn't end with our children. Jesus challenges the apostles (and us), to receive anyone and everyone in just the same way.

Perhaps that's the challenge of today's gospel. Hearing the word is a definite first step to following Jesus. And it's a good place to be. At times, the Word is so up lifting, we can be fooled into thinking that the only thing under our skin is light. But as the Eucharist reminds us, Jesus is the Word become Body and Blood. We enter into this mystery when the priest or deacon adds a drop of water to the wine and quietly recites the ancient prayer – by the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity." And humanity bleeds. It bled in Jesus' time, and bleeds in our time.

That's why Jesus came - to move us toward stopping the bleeding wherever and whenever we can. By so doing, we move from being simply hearers of the Word, to being doers of the Word. As we move to the table, let Jesus' words move you to action -- "*Receive everyone as you receive a child.*" They're out there, fallen and bleeding on the sidewalks of life. Welcome them. Receive them as you receive a child. Do this and you cooperate with God's love! Do this and you come to share in Christ's divinity!

On Turning Ten by Billy Collins

The whole idea of it makes me feel
like I'm coming down with something,
something worse than any stomach ache
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light--
a kind of measles of the spirit,
a mumps of the psyche,
a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
but that is because you have forgotten
the perfect simplicity of being one
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

But now I am mostly at the window
watching the late afternoon light.
Back then it never fell so solemnly
against the side of my tree house,
and my bicycle never leaned against the garage
as it does today,
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.
This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I could shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.