

The Church Is No Place for Joy

In church the other Sunday I was intent on a small child who was turning around smiling at everyone. He wasn't gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing the hymnals, or rummaging through his mother's handbag. He was just smiling. Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theater off Broadway said, "Stop grinning! You're in a church!" With that, she gave him a smack on his hind side and as the tears rolled down his cheeks added, "that's better," and returned to her prayers. I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The smiling God, the God who had to have a sense of humor to have created the likes of us. (by Erma Bombeck)

Unconditional Love

What is your view of God? The scowling judge waiting to convict you? The disapproving parent whose love you have to earn? Your view of God affects every decision and relationship in your life. Kathleen Chesto wrote to *Catholic Digest* to tell them about an incident that occurred in her family. Her five-year-old child approached her one day in the kitchen and asked, "Mom, is God a grown-up or a parent?"

Mom was a little puzzled by the question. "I'm not sure what you mean," she said. "Is there a difference between a grown-up and a parent?" "Oh yes," her five-year-old answered quickly. **"Grown-ups love you when you are good and parents love you anyway."** I know this sounds trite to some of you, but have you ever really come to appreciate the wonder of God's unconditional love? I dare say that there are some people in this room who don't really believe in unconditional love. You have never received it, and you have never given it. Some of you are still trying to earn your way to heaven. And you are expecting others to earn their way as well. Relax, my friend, and let God love you.

Jesus is trying to tell us in this parable that God's love doesn't depend on our goodness; it depends on God's character. Here is this truth expressed in I John 4: 10, **"This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us,** and sent His son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (by King Duncan from *Collected Sermons* at www.Sermons.com)

Enter Fully into the Light

Ralph Milton tells of the teacher who, for reasons of her own, asked the kids one day, "If all the bad children were painted red and all the good children were painted green, which color would you be?"

Think about it. What color would you be? Red or Green? It is a tough question isn't it when you pose only two options.

One very wise child answered the teacher: "Striped"

The reason I am going on about this point is simple. It seems to me that in the frame of the story - everyone but Jesus is striped. And that in the world today - it is the same.

We are a curious combination of the lost and the found. We are striped. We are - in some sense - not completely complete. It is hard language, this language of lost and found, especially for folks in the middle, as most of us are most of the time. It seems too absolute.

Rarely are we completely lost. And rarely are we completely found. There is always a part of us that needs to be dragged and cajoled into the light, and there is always a part of us that is already there. Some more - some less. But always something.

The wonderful thing is - that God wants us to enter fully into the light. The wonderful thing is that God wants to bless us all richly to keep us safe, to make us strong, to help us be like a Shepherd who really cares for his sheep, like a poor widow who really values all her coins. (cited by Richard Fairchild in *Seeking the Lost*)

Parts of the Whole

The lost sheep and the lost coin are more than the prized possessions of their owners; they are also parts of a whole. The sheep belongs to the flock and the coin to the purse; without them the whole is not complete. The search, then, is a quest for restoration and wholeness. In this sense, all of us who are part of God's creation should be just as anxious as God until the lost are restored and we are made whole again by their presence. Then, with brooms in hand, we can answer God's call, "Rejoice with me." (by Jennifer E. Copeland from *Clean Sweep*, article appearing in *The Christian Century*, September 7, 2004, p. 20)

God Loves Me

There is a wonderful story about Maya Angelou. She is an active member now of Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco. She wrote that years ago when she first came to San Francisco as a young woman she became sophisticated. She said that was what you were supposed to do when you go to San Francisco, you become sophisticated. And for that reason she said she became agnostic. She thought the two went together. She said that it wasn't that she stopped believing in God, just that God no longer frequented the neighborhoods that she frequented.

She was taking voice lessons at the time. Her teacher gave her an exercise where she was to read out of some religious pamphlet. The reading ended with these words: "God loves me." She finished the reading, put the pamphlet down. The teacher said, "I want you to read that last sentence again." So she picked it up, read it again, this time somewhat sarcastically, then put it down again. The teacher said, "Read it again." She read it again. Then she described what happened.

"After about the seventh repetition I began to sense there might be some truth in this statement. That there was a possibility that God really loves me, Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all.

I knew if God loved me, I could do wonderful things. I could do great things. I could learn anything. I could achieve anything. For what could stand against me with God, since one person, any person, with God form a majority now."

(by Mark Trotter from *Collected Sermons*, www.Sermons.com)