

Easter 4B – 2021

On Facebook there is a clip of Pope Francis hugging this little boy who was crying. The little guy, couldn't have been more than 5 years old – was at an event where the Pope was taking questions from kids. As the boy named Emmanuel approached the microphone, he first appeared to be nervous and the Holy Father tried to encourage him to speak... But as he stood there he got more anxious and it seemed like he had stage fright, as another priest appeared to try to calm his nerves. At that point he just broke down and started to cry, so the Pope motioned to him to come up to him and just to whisper in his ear what it was he wanted to ask.

And you got to witness the Pope hugging the little boy as he was whispering in the Pope's ear for a few minutes what was making him so upset and the Pope talking back to him.

When little Emmanuel went back to his seat, the Pope explained *"Emmanuel told me that a short time ago, his father died. He was an atheist, but he had all four of his children baptized. He was a good man. Little Emmanuel had this doubt that his Father not being a believer could not go to heaven."*

Pope Francis explained: *"It is God who decides who goes to heaven. But how is God's heart in front of a father like that? What do you think? It's a Dad's heart. God has a dad's heart. And in front of a dad who, even if not a believer has been able to baptize his children, and pass on to them his goodness, do you think that God could leave him far from Him?"* (by Fr. Jim Chern - Newman Catholic Center at Montclair State University, NJ)

There's a disturbing trend within our churches today. Simply put, we are seeing the embrace of our churches become less-and-less inclusive. More and more, our churches are demanding a purity and exclusivity not demanded by Jesus in Gospels.

What does it mean to be inclusive? We can begin with the word "Catholic": The opposite of being "Catholic" is not being "Protestant." The opposite of "Catholic" is being narrow, exclusive, and overly selective in our embrace. The opposite of being "Catholic" is to define our faith-family too-narrowly. "Catholic" means wide, universal. It means incarnating the embrace of an abundant and prodigal God whose sun shines on all indiscriminately, the bad as well as the good. Jesus once defined this by saying: "In my father's house there are many rooms." God's heart is wide, abundant, prodigal, and universally-embracing, a heart that takes care to pray for those "other sheep who are not of this fold." To be "Catholic" is to imitate that.

Everyone else, without a single exception, falls short. In the gospels we see that Jesus' passion for inclusivity virtually always trumps his concern for purity and worthiness. He associates and dines with sinners without setting any prior moral conditions that have to be met to before those sinners are deemed worthy of his presence. His disciples, much like many good sincere church-people today, were forever trying to keep certain people away from him because they deemed them unworthy; but Jesus always answered that he didn't need that kind of protection,

and that, indeed, he wanted them all to come to him: let them come to me! Indeed, that is still Jesus' call: Let them come to me, all of them!

We need to be more inclusive. I highlight this because today our faith families are shrinking and instead of us weeping empathically about this loss of wholeness we are more prone to be secretly gleeful about it: good riddance: they weren't real Christians anyway! Or, in the words of some Catholic commentators, they were Cafeteria-Catholics, picking and choosing which parts of the Gospel they liked and turning a meaty Catholicism into Catholic-Light.

Today, on both sides of the ideological divide, conservative or liberal alike, we need to remind ourselves of what it means to live under an abundant, prodigal, universally-embracing, and "Catholic" God. What it means, among other things of course, is a constant stretching of the heart to an ever-wider inclusivity. How wide are our hearts? (by Fr. Ron Rolheiser)

True Abundant Life

One day a man stopped in a convenience store to get a newspaper. He noticed that the owner of the store had tears in his eyes and kept looking out the window. He asked what was going on. The store owner said, "Do you see that bus bench over there? There's a woman who comes there every day around this time. She sits there for about an hour, knitting and waiting. Buses come and go, but she never gets on one and no one ever gets off for her to meet. The other day, I carried her a cup of coffee and sat with her for a while. "Her only son lives a long way away. She last saw him two years ago, when he boarded one of the buses right there. He is married now, and she has never met her daughter-in-law or seen their new child. She told me, 'It helps to come here and wait. I pray for them as I knit little things for the baby, and I imagine them in their tiny apartment, saving money to come home. I can't wait to see them.'"

The reason the owner was looking out the window at that particular moment was that the three of them-- the son, his wife and their small child--were just getting off the bus. The look on the woman's face when this small family fell into her arms was one of pure joy. And this joy only increased when she looked into the face of her grandchild for the first time. The store owner commented, **"I'll never forget that look as long as I live."**

The next day the same man returned to the convenience store. The owner was again behind the counter. Before the store owner could say or do anything, the customer said, "You sent her son the money for the bus tickets, didn't you?" The store owner looked back with eyes full of love and a smile and replied, "Yes, I sent the money." Then he repeated his statement from the day before, **"I'll never forget that look as long as I live."** This man had discovered a measure of the abundant life. (by King Duncan from *Collected Sermons*, Sermons.com)