

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, 2018  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael Renninger

It happened last weekend.

Pope Francis went to visit a small church in Rome, adjacent to one of the largest public housing projects in Italy.

As part of his visit to this parish, five children were selected to ask the Holy Father a question.

The first little boy named Emanuele. He was about four or five years old.

The pope was sitting on a little stage. Emanuele approached the microphone near the steps, where he would ask his question.

When he got to the microphone, he froze. He just kept looking at the pope. You could hear the other children encouraging him.

And then, Emanuele started to cry. A priest tried to assure him, but he just stood there and cried.

Then, Pope Francis said, "Emanuele, come and whisper your question in my ear." So the little boy approached the holy father. Pope Francis opened his arms and embraced the boy with absolute love. Emanuele put his face right against the Pope's face. For a while, Emanuele just cried, and The Holy Father just embraced him.

Then, the little boy started to whisper in the Pope's ear. And the pope whispered into the boy's ear. This went on for about 2 minutes.

Finally, Emanuele smiled, and said goodbye to the pope. He returned to his little seat.

Then, Pope Francis said that he had asked Emanuele if he could tell everyone what the boy's question was, and he gave the pope permission.

Emanuele had told the pope that, very recently, his father had died. He said that his dad was a good man. Emanuele's dad was not a believer, but he had brought all four of his children to be baptized in the church.

Now, his dad was dead. That's part of the reason why he was crying. But he was also crying because he had a hard question. The question was this: "Could his dad, a non-believer, go to heaven?"

Pope Francis answered by saying that it was wonderful to hear a son say that his dad was a 'good man.' And the pope agreed that Emanuele's dad had done a very good thing by having all four of his children baptized, even though he himself did not believe.

Then the pope looked at all of the children and adults who were sitting there and he said, "We have to remember that Only God decides who goes to heaven. And we have to remember that God has the heart of a daddy, a *papa*."

Then the pope asked all of the children, "Do you think that God was happy when Emanuele's dad had his children baptized? Wasn't that a good thing?" All the children shouted 'yes!'

And the pope asked, "Do you think that God is pleased when us when we do good things?" They all shouted "yes."

Then the Pope said, "Do you think that God, who had a dad's heart, would be able to leave Emanuele's dad far from himself?"

A few children shouted, "No!" The pope asked, "Say it louder, with conviction. Would God be able to leave Emanuele's dad far away from himself?" The children shouted, "No!"

The pope smiled at Emanuele and said, "You see! There is your answer." God who loves us with a daddy's heart could not leave your dad far away from himself.

Emanuele smiled

As I finished watching this video, I was in tears. The pope took some very nuanced Catholic doctrines and teachings, and articulated them in a way that dried the tears and lightened the heart of one of God's five year old children!

I thanked God for that. But I also had a sad thought. I said to myself, "Some web page is going to denounce the pope for this, saying that he is a heretic." And sure enough, by the next day, the headlines were on the internet: "Pope faces backlash for telling child that atheists go to heaven."

Human beings are so good at setting limits around God's love. We tell ourselves that we are qualified to determine who's in, and who's out; who's included, who's excluded; who is holy, who is going to hell.

And we approach the scriptures, not expecting to be surprised by God, but hoping to find a line or two which will bolster convictions we've already created in our minds, convictions based, not on the Gospel, but on our political, cultural or fear-based assumptions.

In today's first reading, we hear a line which has been used by this week's critics of the Pope. In chapter 4 of the Acts of the Apostles, Peter says, "There is no salvation through anyone else

(other than Jesus), nor is there any name under heaven given to the human race by which we are saved.”

The critics of the pope say, “See! Unless you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe the Christian faith you can’t be saved! Peter said so!”

Now, when Peter preached these words, he was indeed preaching the truth. We believe that the salvation of the human race happens *one way* – it happens because Jesus is the son of God, and Jesus became one of us, and Jesus died and rose and sent us his Spirit. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the source of salvation for the world. Jesus is the perfect revelation of who God is, and how God saves.

That is what Peter proclaims in Chapter 4 of the Acts of the Apostles. But you know what happens next? God starts surprising people. At first, many of Christ’s followers believed that if you wanted to follow Jesus, you had to become a Jew first. See? We like to build walls around Jesus and his love. We like to dictate how people gain access.

But God surprised those early Christians. In the rest of the Acts of the Apostles, more and more people start to experience God’s love through Jesus. Men, women, boys, girls, slaves, rich, poor. People who were Jewish. People who were *not*. It seems that once God unleashed his saving love in the world, it starts to spread in ways we can’t control, despite our best efforts.

Maybe that is part of what Jesus means as he speaks to his people in John’s Gospel. Jesus begins with a beautiful image: “I am the good shepherd. I love my flock. I give everything for my sheep. I know mine and they know me.”

And then Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead.”

Hmmm. There was Jesus, talking to his earliest followers, telling them, “I have *other* sheep too...” Maybe we don’t know who they are! But Jesus loves them just the same, and will find a way to include them in his heart.

Saint John says, “we are God’s children now.” Isn’t that amazing? In that same visit to the little parish in Rome, the Pope said that everyone who has ever been born is created in God’s image, and is loved by God. I am not sure that it’s our task to try to *fully* explain how Christ’s saving gift is experienced by people who have never heard the Gospel effectively preached, or people whose life circumstances have made it impossible for them to fully come to know Christ.

But I do know this – *God’s love is bigger than my limitations.*

My life – Mike Renninger’s life - has been changed for the better because I fell in love with Jesus. And, like anyone who falls in love, I want other people to meet and know and love the One that I love. So I happily spend my life inviting others to know this Jesus who is everything

for me. That's my vocations. That is your vocation too.

And if I ever find myself wanting to concoct new barriers or judge someone as 'beyond God's ability to love them,' I need to remember what Jesus says in today's Gospel: I have other sheep, not in the fold that you happen to know, and I will shepherd them.

If I find myself thinking that some part of me is beyond redemption, or some other person – or group of persons – is beyond saving, I will always think of Pope Francis embracing a little boy named Emanuele, and telling him, "Remember, God loves us with a daddy's heart. A *papa's* heart. Could he want us to be far away from him?"

So whatever is worrying you, whomever is worrying you... come, and whisper it in Gods ear.

*Copyright 2018 by Rev. Michael A. Renninger. All rights reserved.*