

Christmas 2014

Over the past year since last Christmas, I continue to be in conversations about our new Pope. The conversations have been initiated by fellow Catholics but also by Jewish and Protestant people and folks with no particular belief system, all seemingly captivated by Pope Francis. Here at All Saints we have been reflecting on the Pope's exhortation: The Joy of the Gospel and will continue to do so over the coming new year. Mary McAleese, the former president of Ireland has said that even the "kick the Pope" Orangemen of Northern Ireland love Pope Francis! The press continues to be obsessed with him: his picture has been on the cover of Time Magazine, Rolling Stone and, even the financial magazine, Fortune. In recent months, Pope Francis has been named the most popular person world!

As many of us know, as Pope, Francis has simplified the Renaissance regalia of the papacy by abandoning the fur-trimmed velvet capes, choosing to live in a two room apartment and replacing the papal Mercedes with a Ford Focus. He makes changes without attacking people. "Who am I to judge," are words of Francis that indicate a change in understanding of what leadership is in the Church. It is a move from rule by non-negotiable imperatives to leadership by invitation and welcome. Repeatedly, he argues that the Church's purpose is to proclaim God's merciful love for all people rather than to condemn sinners for having fallen short of legal strictures. Pope Francis views the Church as a field hospital after battle. He has said, "The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful."

The Pope's concern for the poor and forgotten of society has taken center stage in his leadership. He has also said, "In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others." Pope Francis, I believe, has caught the imagination of so many people around the world because he has articulated so well the meaning of Christmas. God becoming one of us in the birth of Jesus Christ opened the eyes of an indifferent world. Francis said, "I have a dogmatic certainty..." (Now, Pope Francis doesn't talk a lot about 'dogmatics'... *this* is what he said) "*I have a dogmatic certainty*: God is in every person's life – not just Catholics. Everyone!" For Francis, the Church's purpose is not to bring God to the world but simply to emphasize God's presence – already here! And when we truly recognize the presence of God in every person, it fundamentally changes how we live with one another, and: we truly have the meaning of Christmas! God is present not only in the loved ones and friends sitting around us here, but God is found in the down-trodden, the rebellious, the powerless, the broken, the poor, ... even in our enemies!

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A young mother tells a true story of one Christmas Day that brings the point out so clearly:

“It was a Sunday – Christmas Day – our family had spent a holiday in San Francisco with my husband’s parents, but in order for us to be back at work on Monday, we found ourselves driving the 400 miles back home to Los Angeles on Christmas Day.

We stopped for lunch in King City. The restaurant was nearly empty. We were the only family and ours were the only children. I heard Erik, my one-year-old, squeal with glee. “Hithere,” the two words he always thought were one: “Hithere,” and he pounded his fat baby hands – whack, whack, whack – on the metal highchair. His face was alive with excitement, his eyes were wide, gums bare in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled, and then I saw the source of his merriment. And my eyes could not take it in all at once.

A tattered rag of a coat, obviously bought by someone else eons ago; dirty, greasy and worn; baggy pants; spindly body; toes poking out of his shoes; a shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over; and a face like none other – gums as bare as Erik’s.

“Hi there, baby! Hi there, big boy; I see ya, Buster!”

My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between “What do we do?” and “Poor devil.” Our meal came and the banging in the noise continued. Now the old man was shouting across the room: “Do you know ‘Patty-cake’? Atta boy! Do you know ‘Peek-a-boo’? Hey look! He knows ‘Peek-a-boo’!” Erik continued to laugh and answer, “Hithere.” Every call was echoed. Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was a drunk and a disturbance. I was embarrassed. My husband, Dennis, was humiliated. Even our six-year-old said, “Why is that old man talking so loud?”

Dennis went to pay the check, imploring me to get Erik and meet him in the parking lot. “Lord, just let me get out of here before he speaks to me or Erik,” and I bolted for the door. It soon was obvious that both the Lord and Erik had other plans. As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back walking to side-step him and any air that he might be breathing. As I did so, Erik – all the while with his eyes riveted to his new best friend – leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms to a baby’s pick-me-up position. In a split-second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight, I came eye-to-eye with the old man. Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The man’s eyes both asked and implored: “Would you let me hold your baby?” There was no need for me to answer since Erik propelled himself from my arms to the man. Suddenly a very old man and a very young baby consummated their love relationship.

Erik laid his tiny head upon the man’s ragged shoulder. The man’s eyes closed and I saw tears hover beneath the lashes. His aged hands – full of grime and pain and hard labor – gently, so gently, cradled my baby’s bottom and stroked his back. I stood awestruck.

The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm, commanding voice: "You take care of this baby." And somehow I managed, "I will" from a throat that contained a stone. He pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as though he was in pain. I held my arms open to receive my baby, and again the gentleman addressed me: "God bless you, M'am. You've given me my Christmas gift." I said nothing more than a muttered "thanks." With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly. And why I was saying, "My God, forgive me. My God, forgive me."

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*They were in Bethlehem when the time came for her to have her child,
and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him in swaddling
clothes and laid him in a manger.*

*Suddenly there were angels praising God and singing: "Glory to God in the
highest! Peace on earth – for God is blessing humankind!"*

Amen! Merry Christmas!