

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B
April 25, 2021
Father Michael Renninger

It happened in April, 3 years ago.

Pope Francis went to visit a small church in Rome, adjacent to one of the largest public housing projects in Italy. Since I myself am a Catholic priest, I tend to pay attention to where the pope goes, and what he says when he preaches!

As part of his visit to this church, five children were selected to ask the Pope a question.

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

The pope was sitting on a little platform. Emanuele approached the microphone near the steps. That's 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 little children encouraging him.

And then, Emanuele started to cry. An adult in the crowd 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 went up the steps. 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 pope just kept embracing 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. Emanuele had given 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 dad himself did not believe.

Then the pope looked at all of the children and adults who were sitting in front of him, 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 with us when we do good things?” They all shouted “yes.”

Then the Pope said, “Do you think that God, who had a papa’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 pap’s heart, a daddy’s heart could not leave your dad far away from himself.

Emanuele smiled.

As I finished watching that video, I was in tears. As a priest, I was so moved by the way that Pope Francis took this little boy, and his question, seriously. The pope took some very nuanced Christian 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 prayed that, in my daily ministry, I could be so wise and loving.

I thanked God for what I saw and heard on that video. But I also had a sad thought. I said to myself, “Some web page, which calls itself an “Orthodox Catholic” webpage, is going to denounce the pope for this, and say 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.” This happened three years ago. The criticism has continued.

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 sometimes 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, less on the Gospel, more on our political, cultural or fear-based assumptions.

Today in the Acts of the Apostles, we hear a line which was used by the Pope’s critics. In chapter 4 of the Acts of the Apostles, Peter says, “There is salvation in no one else (that is, no

one other than Jesus), for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Three year ago, the critics of the pope said, "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 whole world. Jesus is the perfect revelation of who God is, and how God saves.

That's what Peter proclaims in Chapter 4 of the Acts of the Apostles. But keep reading. 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 Jewish 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, servants, rich, poor. People who were Jewish. People who were *not*. It seems that once God unleashes 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 today. Jesus begins with a beautiful images: "I am the good shepherd. I love my flock. I give everything for my sheep. I lay down my life for them. I know mine and they know me."

And then Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

Hmmm. There's Jesus, talking to his earliest followers, telling them, "I have *other* sheep too..." Maybe they didn't know who those 'other sheep' were. Maybe we don't know who they are! But Jesus loves them just the same, and will find a way to shepherd them, and include them in his heart.

In the first letter of John, the sacred author says, "God is greater than our hearts..." Saint John also reminds us that we are God's children, right now. Today. And Saint John reminds us that we are called to love, not just in word or speech, but in truth and action.

"We are God's children." Isn't that amazing? In his visit to that little church in Rome, Pope Francis said that everyone who has ever been born is created in God's image, and is loved by God.

So, 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 is greater than our hearts.” Which means that *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 vocation. That’s 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 God want us to be far away from him?”

So whatever is worrying you, whatever is making you cry... come, and whisper it in God’s ear.

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