BELONGING TO JESUS AS HE BELONGS TO US

Some American tourists were visiting the exotic city of Tangier in Morocco. One of the tourists spent time before the trip studying that country’s customs and culture, but apparently the others didn’t do any preparation. When the Americans went to buy some of the country’s famous brass pots, their ignorance became apparent. It seems that an expected part of any such transaction is for merchants to get close enough to the buyers to “exchange breaths,” which establishes the mutual trust needed for bargaining. But each time a merchant approached one of the Americans, the tourist would back up. The merchant would step closer, and the American would again back up. The scene became like a strange dance as the merchants kept stepping forward and the Americans kept stepping back. Before long the Americans became so uncomfortable that everybody, except the one woman who understood what was going on, retreated to the bus without buying anything.

Unfortunately, leaving without even bargaining is the ultimate insult. In that country it was okay not to buy, but only after at least agreeing to disagree on the price. The merchants were so angry that they surrounded the bus and began spitting on it. In the meantime the prepared tourist had fared much better. When the merchant stepped closer to exchange breaths, she followed suit. As a result she purchased a brass pot at a very reasonable price. But she was left with the problem of how to get on the bus through the angry crowd. In the midst of her perplexity, she heard the merchant with whom she had dealt shouting: “It’s OK! It’s OK! She’s one of us!”

To be accepted by others is one of the most significant motivating factors in our lives. Like the woman who got caught outside the bus, we look for others to say: “It’s OK! She’s one of us!” The college freshman on campus away from home for the first time is easily drawn to the need for a fraternity or sorority that says to them: “It’s OK. We’ll be your family while you’re here. You can be one of us.” New parishioners who move into an area don’t feel quite at home in a parish until they have an opportunity to meet some other folks in the parish, share something to eat and drink, take part in a local social function. Then they begin to feel at home and have a sense of connection. Then, after time and shared activity the can say to themselves: “I’m one of them. I belong.”

Without a sense of belonging, the newly hired person in the office will go off for lunch by himself until someone extends an invitation to join the group. The neighbors who just moved in next door will probably keep to themselves until someone on the block breaks the ice and makes the first phone call or visit. Each one of us longs to feel needed and wanted. Being part of others gives purpose to our lives, renews our sense of self-worth, builds bond of community, lets us know that we’re not alone in the world.

The Easter gospels we’ve been sharing are stories about belonging. For fifty days we are watching the community of believers increase in faith and grow in numbers as the Spirit of Jesus draws them
more closely into the community of the Church. Jesus goes to great length to let his disciples know that he still belongs to them, that he is “one of them.” Last Sunday we heard the story of how he came to them in spite of locked doors. Jesus “breathed” on them, just like the merchants at the market in Tangiers tried to exchange breath with the tourists, to establish a link of trust. Jesus wanted his friends to touch his hands and his side, the place of his wounds. “It’s really me,” he assured them. “I’m still one of you.”

Today, the gospel of John continues to unfold the Easter story for us. Even though they don’t recognize him at first, Jesus is on the shore cooking breakfast for his friends who are out on their boats fishing. Blowing on the burning embers to keep the fire going, he has prepared fish and bread. This is the same Jesus who sat with them at so many meals. Now he sets a seaside breakfast for them. He is still one of them. They are sure of it; they ate the Sunday brunch he prepared for them without any further questions. “No one dared ask: ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord.”

Well, their questions might have been answered, but Jesus still had a few questions of his own. And his questions were difficult ones. So he took Simon Peter aside and tried to find out if Peter was a part of Jesus -- if Peter belonged to Jesus the way Jesus belonged to him. As if to reverse the three times Peter denied Christ before his crucifixion, Jesus repeats the question, not once, but three times: “Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these?” If we are going to belong to Jesus, we have to carry out his command. We have to feed the lambs and feed the sheep. We have to tend the flock that Jesus left in our care. And a vast flock it is.

In the past two days at her vigil service and funeral, people in our parish and in the Diocese mourned the loss and celebrated the life of someone who responded to the Lord’s invitation wholeheartedly. Penny Pendola was the Director of the Office of Human Resources for the Oakland Diocese for the past twenty-five years. In that capacity she assisted pastors and principals in maneuvering the often-challenging task of employee management. As a woman of the Church – one who never married, but gave her time and energy and devotion for a greater good, Penny stands in the long line of women who have made and are making a difference in the Church. Hers was not an easy task. If she had to come in to clean up a personnel mess that one of us priests made because of our lack of administrative training and our ignorance of civil employment law, she got a bad rap from a pastor. If she had to help remove a lay employee for incompetence or whatever reason, she was “unfairly sticking up for the institution and the priest.” In many ways, hers was a “no-win” job – not an enviable position. Yet she tried to do her best in exercising that role with fairness, compassion, competence and understanding.

As a woman of the Church, Penny stands in the long line of women who, with Mary Magdalene, proclaim the resurrection: “I have seen the Lord!” And as Mary Magdalene’s role in scripture had been for so long repressed, glossed over or, worse, misconstrued, so the women in our Church
today still struggle for that recognition and acceptance. They too are “Apostle to the Apostles” as they strive to share with, and alongside their brothers, the gifts of the Spirit that God has abundantly entrusted to them.

Here in the Oakland Diocese Penny made an impact for over three decades among bishops, clergy, religious and laity who recognized her gifts and invited her to use them for good of the Church and the glory of God. In the instructions she left, Penny requested that her vigil and funeral be celebrated here at St. Perpetua, the community she loved, and where she worshiped each week. Although she held a diocesan office, worked at the Chancery building for the Bishop and beneath the Cathedral, this was Penny’s faith home that nourished her heart and soul, and gave her the courage and faith to say each day: Lord, you know that I love you; I’ll feed your sheep and tend your flock. We were so blessed that “she was one of us!”

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