“He loves us so much”

Not long ago, the doorbell rang and soon after, the happy sound of visitors echoed through the hallway. I peered out and saw five-year-old Antonio, the son of a woman we were serving. As he approached me and I crouched to introduce myself, he grabbed the large St. Benedict crucifix dangling at my side on my Rosary and demanded an explanation. “Tell me the story,” he intoned with inquisitive eyes. “Well,” I began, only slightly startled by the invitation to give catechesis so soon within the convent door. “God loved you so much that He became a man and suffered and died for you and was buried and then after three days, He rose from the dead so you could be happy with Him forever in heaven!” Antonio’s eyes got rounder and he took a few minutes to ponder all this. After a while, he looked at me, picked up my Rosary again and insisted, “Tell me the story.” I took a deep breath and began again, “God loves you so much! He loves you so much that He came to earth as a man, suffered, and died for you and was buried, then rose from the dead so you could live with Him forever happy in heaven!” And so the morning was spent. As we played together, every few minutes, Antonio would peer at me with a smile and insist, “Tell me the story!” After explanation number 10 or so, he joined in the story, eyes closed tight and with full conviction he would boom, “He loved us so much, so much, so much!” By the 30th time, Antonio could proclaim it all by heart like this reality was something deep within him.

And isn’t it the same for us, too? We need to constantly be told and retold the story of God’s love for us, of His tender care and gift of Jesus to us. Daily, we need to take time to receive this truth, to open our hearts to the overwhelming love of Jesus and His gift of salvation, to let this truth permeate our entire being. Antonio’s heart was open. He was open to an encounter with a Someone Whose Presence could change his whole world. He was open to the story of a Love that personally included him. Each of us is included, personally, in the story of this Love, Who is Jesus. For us, the task is to daily surrender our fears, weaknesses, insecurities, sufferings, joys, everything into the hands of the One who understands so poignantly our human experience. Jesus is not a distant figure to be smiled at with distrust from afar while we seek to manage our own affairs. No, He is a Lover, Who desires the surrender of my all to Him so He can truly move in me with freedom. And it is in this daily encounter with Him, in the Sacraments and in prayer with Scripture, that we are given the ability to authentically love. As Pope Francis wrote in his first Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel:

The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us (par.264).

As Ash Wednesday draws near, with perhaps high ideals or maybe hesitation after years of feeling like an annual Lenten failure, maybe we can approach this season with this new perspective. Let us enter Lent seeking simply to encounter Love, the Love who has a name — Jesus. And in receiving Jesus simply in silence, may the Lord move our hearts to love with His love. Pope Francis goes on to say, “The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known?”

Antonio got it. He understood Love. May we, like Antonio, never tire of asking Jesus, “Tell me the story.” We, too, can then say with him, “He loves us so much, so much, so much!”