

Traveling Companion: Thou Shalt Not Discriminate

Fr. Michael Tracey

She called on Tuesday afternoon. With patience, acceptance and understanding, she began to relate what happened to her in church the previous Sunday, following Mass.

Jane, an African-American woman, her husband, and her family attended Mass. They attend weekly. They sacrifice to place their children in Catholic schools for a well-rounded education.

As Jane and her family left Mass, she was stopped by a parishioner who told her that she should be going to the African-American Catholic Church in the area instead of the church she was now attending.

Jane, firmly but diplomatically told the parishioner that it was her choice to attend this particular church. She informed her that, when they moved into the area, they attended various Catholic Churches. She did this in order to find a particular church that would meet her and her family needs as well as a church where they could call home.

Now, she had found a church where she felt at home in and was happy there. Then along comes a fellow parishioner and informs her that she should not be attending church there but elsewhere. When Jane shared the incident, I got angry and frustrated. Maybe, in my naiveté, I had thought we had gone beyond such overt discrimination in the church but it seems that vestiges of it still simmers in the conclave of some people's hearts.

Perhaps, old prejudices die hard. Perhaps, the splinter in a person's eye is too comfortable for that person to see it. Perhaps, openness to examine outdated beliefs is harder to accomplish than opening a childproof cover on a medicine bottle. Perhaps, insularity has provided too comfortable a protection for too long for some people. Perhaps, the dark ages are still dark in some people's eyes. Perhaps, it is easier to lash out at someone rather than examine one's own conscience.

Perhaps we need to revisit the concept of "catholic" which means universal. Universal includes embracing all; irrespective of race, color, creed, political affiliation, income level, country of origin.

If we are 'catholic' with a small c or a big C, we embrace all. We don't check ID's at the door. If we truly believe in the message and example of Jesus, then, we embrace it totally, not in a buffet style, picking and choosing to satisfy our prejudicial tastes. After all, he broke down all barriers, crossing over imaginary and real divisions while he embraced all. He sat by the wells of life with ostracized and foreign women. He ate at table with tax collectors. He allowed prostitutes to wash his feet. He forgave those about to be stoned. He was even born in a foreign land, among the animals. He forgave criminals. He challenged the "accepted" practices of the time. He bent the rituals and rules of the day to heal on the Sabbath. He got angry as those who desecrated the temple and the temple of people's lives. He died a criminal because he challenged the vices and vestiges of discrimination of his time.

Now, we his followers, have a tall order to follow, a prescription for life that challenges entrenched beliefs, old habits, narrow-mindedness, discrimination. He challenges us to be universal in our thoughts and actions; accepting of differences and uniqueness that are of his creating; treating each with respect and dignity as a created reality of God dwelling among us in unique forms that defy human classification or comprehension.

I know that Jane's heart is bigger in the eyes of God than any one person's prejudice. And I know that she and her family will be in church on Sunday.