

Out of Character

Our annual Crab Festival is held during July 4th weekend and draws thousands of people both locally and from surrounding states and even from California.

In the heat of the day, I discard my official clerical black garb for a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. I mingle among the crowd in my out of character pose. Some are taken aback by my attire and don't recognize me immediately. Their expectations are shattered.

But the most interesting aspect of my out of character pose is with children. Obviously, many children recognize me from doing car line in school during the school year and are accustomed to my black official attire. The same is true of children in church.

On the grounds, during Crab Fest, I am amused by the startled look of some children when they see me in shorts and a T-shirt. Some look at me a few times, thinking in their little minds, that they recognize me from some place but my attire confuses them. One little girl sizes me up and down for a while and then runs to her mother to ask, "Is that Fr. Tracey?" Her mother assures her that it is and all seems to be well but still confusing.

Rambling around the grounds, I encounter a grandfather and his two grandchildren – a little boy and his little sister. They seem to recognize me from church but they are not quite sure. Their grandfather reminds them, "That's Fr. Tracey." I'm not sure if they still want to believe him but they still hesitate. I sense that the little four year old girl still thinks I am Jesus because of seeing me in church. My doubts are confirmed when she looks up at me through her glasses and asks, "Do you talk to God?"

How do you answer such a question without too much verbiage? I simply said to her, "I do. And don't you?" She nodded her head and seemed to be satisfied.

The experience reminded me of the New York Times bestseller book by Todd Burpo, called "Heaven is for real – a child's astonishing story of his trip to heaven & back." It is the story of Colson, his four year old son, who, while having emergency appendectomy surgery, had an out of body experience. He meets God the Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit, his great-grandpa, his sister who died prematurely in her mother's womb. At one stage, his father, who is a Methodist Minister, is pondering the meaning of Good Friday. Colson has his own explanation and simply says, "Jesus told me he died on the cross so we could go and see his Dad."

It's amazing that, as adults, we can theologize as much as we want; study all kinds of nuances of meaning and ways of expressing such meaning but often it takes the insight and wisdom of a child to cut through everything to the heart of the matter.

Gretchen Ruben, in her book, "The Happiness Project" spends a year studying the different aspects of happiness. She takes a different theme each month. In one of her chapters she meets a friend and they start discussing children and their impact on a relationship. The friend says, "One reason I love having a new baby is a reminder that time has slowed down. My wife and I felt like our lives were speeding by, but the minute Clara was born, it was like time stood still. Each week has been like an era, so much happens."

Every morning during school, I watch a sixth grade girl and her dad. He dad drops her off early for school. There are a few hugs and kisses and, as the sixth grader walks away, she turns around one last time and blows kisses toward her dad. Obviously, she is daddy's girl but the nice thing about it is that she is not embarrassed to show her love for her dad.

As adults, we are prim and proper. We posture. We obfuscate. Children are open, spontaneous, relational, trusting and surprising.

So, next Sunday, I will look for a little four year old girl with glasses who still thinks I am Jesus. When I see her, even though I will be in character, I will remember her question and that there are certain things that the Lord has hidden from the wise and the learned and has revealed to little children.