

Revealing the Faith through our Actions

At a recent funeral, I shared a story told by a former police officer named Jennings Buch.

Jennings tells the story of calling a wrong number, in the days long before there was caller ID.

The first time he called the number, a husky male voice shouted “you got the wrong number!”

Curious he called the man back, because as a policeman he was a little curious how the man answered the phone saying that the person on the other end had the wrong number before he got any words out.

This time he said “He, c’mon, is this you again?” Jennings said it was, and that he was curious how he knew he had the wrong number before he said anything.

“You figure it out!” he shouted as he hung up again.

Well, you guessed it - he called back, and the man said “did you figure it out yet?”

Jennings said “the only thing I can think of is nobody calls you ever.”

“You got it!” and the man hung up.

Jennings called though yet again, and this time got the gruff man off guard. He said if no one ever calls you, perhaps he should. And so he asked who he was.

Jennings learned that the man was Adolf Meth; he was 88 years old. They talked for 10 minutes, and he learned he had worked for the New York City Police Department for 40 years as an elevator operator. He learned that everyone close to him had died. And after their conversation, Jennings asked if he could call again.

What emerged was a friendship over the phone; Jennings learned of his memories of World War I and II, of the Hindenburg Disaster. They started conversing daily.

While it was an act of kindness, Jennings didn’t see it so much as that. Rather he saw himself as being helped too; he had a gap in his life as one raised in orphanages, and also he was not married. Adolf would give him advice, and almost became a father of sorts to him as he had no father of his own.

As Adolf’s 89th birthday came up, he got a cake with 89 candles and a large greeting card signed by all of the cops in the office and police commissioner. When he went to visit him at his apartment though, the postman informed him that no one was there, and that the man had passed away two days prior.

Though Jennings obviously took it hard, what he remembers from that time in his life was that God put Adolf in his life for a reason. And he thought to himself as for why he'd want to call again, it was because Adolf mattered and he was his friend.

We matter to God so much. We've celebrated that during the Christmas Season remembering God chooses to become one of us and to live with us and to die for us. And on the Baptism of the Lord, we are reminded again how God is with us - standing side by side with the sinners waiting to be baptized by John.

But this feast also reminds us of our baptism too. And that is when we were brought into the Church, and celebrated the fact that we, too, share in the mission of our Lord.

The story struck me because I think as we enter into 2021, and still are dealing with a world that is upside down with the pandemic, bitter partisanship, and so much frustration with things going on in the world, the story of Jennings and Adolf is a reminder of the power of good that is in all of us.

Jesus no longer walks this earth. But he is in you and me. I'm reminded of that at so many funerals I celebrate when the family shares with me the stories of the impact their loved one had on them and others. So many simple things that made such a difference.

What began with a wrong number turned into a series of phone conversations that made two men better. Such is the power of God's love.

So perhaps as we begin this new year, we can think about our own baptism and how with it, we share in the mission of Jesus to evangelize. That comes through talking about the faith, but it also comes in moments like the one shared between Adolf and Jennings. We all are aware of the anger and bitterness out there. You add that to the isolation that so many feel in normal times but especially during the pandemic, and my sense is you have many "Adolfs" who are quietly hurting. What can we do about it? We can show patience, kindness, and empathy. Have a conversation with someone focused on them rather than multi-tasking. Give that gift of time. Be tolerant. Be forgiving and reconcile with people. Have deeper conversations with someone about what is truly in their heart. Be a better listener. Refrain from gossiping and tearing down. And above all else, see others first and foremost as God sees them, created in His image.

Jesus lives through you and me. The problem is sometimes people have a hard time seeing Him in the world - so through our actions, let's do something about it. We may have to "social distance" for a little while yet until things are more normal, but we aren't meant to be distant from one another, but rather be active in the lives of one another as together, we bring each other closer to God.

God bless,

Fr. Paul