

070509

THE SAGA OF JOHNNY THE BAGGER

(Jesus invites each of us to be a point of grace where he can show himself in and through us.)

Barbara Glanz, hired by a supermarket chain to present a program on building customer loyalty, told the employees that every one of them had the opportunity to make a difference. “Put your personal signature on the job,” she advised, telling them to think about what could be done to create memory for customers to keep them coming back.

A month later she received a phone call from Johnny, age 19, who was proud to tell her that he had Downs Syndrome. “I like what you talked about,” he said, “but at first I didn’t think I could do anything special for our customers. After all I’m just a bagger.”

Johnny then said his idea was to find a “thought for the day.” With his father’s help, he printed out multiple copies, cut them apart, and signed his name on the back. After bagging someone’s groceries, he’d put a “thought for the day” in the bag with a note saying, “Thanks for shopping with us.”

The store manager also called, relating that Johnny’s checkout line was three times longer than anyone else’s. When he tried to get more cashiers, the people in line said, “No, it’s okay. We want to be in Johnny’s lane. We want his ‘thought for the day.’”

Months later the manager called again to report that Johnny had transformed their store. “Now when the Floral Department has a broken flower or unused corsage, they find an elderly woman or a little girl and pin it on them. A wonderful spirit of service has spread throughout the entire store...and all because Johnny chose to make a difference.”

(This email account, called “Johnny the Bagger,” arrived from an organization *Simple Truths of Service*. Jesus allows healing to flow out of him. Perhaps each of us allows healing to flow from us when our intention is to be of service.

Mindset. Attitude. Creativity. Johnny did something he didn’t think he could do because someone told him that he could. And then he began to believe that he could. But what if his dad hadn’t helped him? Or if his dad told him that he was wasting his time, that people just wanted their groceries bagged and to get going as fast as possible? Or that it was too much trouble to try to find a new “thought for the day” every day. Johnny would still be bagging but only that.

My friends, you and I cannot change the world. Only the grace of Jesus Christ can do that. But Christ desires you and me to be places where his grace

erupts into our world. That we can do. The little things matter. They make all the difference in life. But sometimes we do not even see where we withhold our encouragement. We do not see where we harden our face as Ezekiel says.

Ask yourself. Is there an area in your life or in a relationship where you are obstinate? Stubborn? Resistant? Implacable? Hard of face? Stiff-necked? What is it that softens our facial muscles or relaxes our neck muscles? Nothing—unless I want it to and allow it to. Do I even know when I am resisting God’s grace and mercy but think I am doing the right thing or that I am actually justified in doing what I am doing? Those people who knew Jesus thought that they had him pegged pretty good. After all, he grew up right there. What could he possibly tell them? Ironically in the Catholic Church almost never is a young man who gets ordained to the priesthood ever assigned to his home parish for precisely this reason. The villagers of Nazareth didn’t believe in Jesus, didn’t think he was very much and so he had no support from them and did nothing great there. When he left they felt justified, “See—he’s not so much after all.” They just didn’t recognize the moment of their visitation and therefore remained the poorer.

Their minds were already made up. They really thought they knew. When we get like that we are in trouble, very vulnerable. Our arrogance blinds us to what truly is. We do not even perceive when we have begun to lose our virtue and begun to settle for “appearing” to be right. This is Independence Day weekend. I would like to read from a short passage penned by Samuel Adams one of our Revolutionary Period forefathers. He said:

A general dissolution of principles and manners will more surely overthrow the liberties of America than the whole force of the common enemy... While the people are virtuous they cannot be subdued; but once they lose their virtue, they will be ready to surrender their liberties to the first external or internal invader... If virtue and knowledge are diffused among the people they will never be enslaved. This will be their great security.”

Virtue. Only if we remain virtuous will our freedom be safe. What Adams calls virtue, Jesus calls holiness. As a country are we virtuous? As a Church, a parish, are we virtuous? As a family and personally are we virtuous? Holy? We can never be these things on our own but we can be these things by the grace of God. Our prejudices, our blind spots, our hard-heartedness are the thorns in the flesh that Paul speaks of. We must acknowledge them and ask God’s help with them. We must purify our hearts, encouraging each other to make a difference. And when we are the ones being encouraged we must allow the words of encouragement to bring hope to our hearts so that God’s grace can erupt from our hearts right where we are—just like it did for Johnny, the Bagger.