

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

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John the Baptist bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'"

(John 1:15)

Please be seated.

Some of you may remember the TV series from the 1950's and 60's, Jack Webb's "Dragnet." Every year there is a particular episode that gets a lot of YouTube play right around Christmas. It is a very touching episode from the mid-1960's relaunch of the series entitled, "The Christmas Story." I was reminded of it this week and I'd like to share it with you.

Sergeant Joe Friday, and his partner, in this case, Officer Bill Gannon, catch the "Christmas Story" case on Christmas Eve. Friday gets the call: a small statue of "the child Jesus" has gone missing from the old Catholic Mission manger scene inside the church. I love some of those terse, flat panned lines in Dragnet, and in this episode no different. Like when the priest apologizes for calling them over on Christmas Eve, Sergeant Friday shrugs, "We cash our checks, father." And in that same conversation, which is when Sgt. Friday first meets Father Rojas, he gently admonishes the padre for leaving his doors wide open for any thief, to which Father Rojas explains that the church is particularly open for thieves.

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The show goes through the police department's willingness to treat this case like any other, applying considerable resources. The tension builds as dead end leads are delaying everyone's Christmas Eve plans and putting a fully decorated Christmas Day mass at the Mission in jeopardy. At one point, Friday's captain decides to take him off the case, but backs down when the sergeant says that his boss will have to be the one to call Father Rojas and explain that there won't be a baby Jesus in the church's manger at Christmas. Who wants that guilt? The case appears to not be possible to solve before services, so Friday and his partner stop back by the church to pass along their regrets to Father Rojas. Just then, the back doors open in the otherwise empty church, and a little boy walks in, very slowly, almost tortuously slow in the show, pulling a red wagon, in which finally comes into view, the missing Jesus statue. It is Paquito, a boy from the parish. Upon being asked by the priest why he has taken the baby Jesus, Paquito very innocently explains that he promised Jesus that if he got a wagon for Christmas, he'd give the Christ child the first ride. And so now he brings him back to the church after the ride. Father Rojas explains to the police that the boy got the wagon from the local fire department, which fixes old toys for underprivileged children. "Paquito's family, they're poor," the priest says. To which Sgt. Friday provides the moral button for the episode. "Are they, father?" And case closed.

No matter how much or how little money you have, if you have Jesus you have everything. And little Paquito, for that little bit of time, being faithful to his promise to God for the answering of his prayer, had in his possession the Lord of the Universe. And so Sergeant Friday's questioning of the presumption of poverty, saying, "Are they?"

There are two main reflective points as I see them: first, we prepare ourselves to go and see Jesus, and if he's missing, everything is absolutely wrong – and the entire world knows it - so we can't afford to have Jesus missing from our lives, and the related second point, if you have Jesus, you have everything.

You might say, Ok, Fr. Rob, I get that point, but my faith can't stop there. I also know I'm supposed to place my Jesus on display, too, just like Paquito did even if he didn't know what he was doing. Showing Jesus to the world. But I just have a hard time trying to explain how Jesus got here, and what he means to me, and what He should mean to someone else.

I understand. No matter how many times you sing, "Go tell it on the mountain!" It doesn't always motivate you to action.

My answer, just to make use of Paquito again, is that We don't have to be able to express any further the meaning of the Word of God than what we have at the moment. If we have Jesus, with as much as we know, and we have given ourselves, with as much as we know how, then my friends, we have everything we need at that moment to be faithful followers, believers, proclaimers. As I said Christmas Eve, it may be as simple and faithful to say, "There He is." "O come let us adore him. The One born to save us."

To say it another way, I want to reference a rather famous Episcopal priest from the same time frame as Dagnet. The reference is to the

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Rev Sam Shoemaker, who was in his prime during the time Dragnet was being broadcast in the 1950's. His preaching and teaching were everywhere in print and on radio, and very, very effective, especially among men and women of university age. He also is the one who is credited as the spiritual founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, due to his ministry to the AA founders. So this experienced, ministry fruitful, priest said this about his own faith and proclamation: he would surrender as much of himself as he could, to as much of Christ as he understood. Well, there's a lot of room in that statement of being a Christian and sharing who Jesus is in our lives, and it should be enough to give us all the permission we need to not wait any longer.

We are to give as much of our heart as we know how, to as much of Jesus as we know. This is doing what you can with where you are right now, but also the call to continue to grow in maturity so that you are constantly learning more of Christ, and thus surrendering more and more of yourself to Him. You can start sharing by showing off Jesus at any time.

The Gospel today is about making God known. For all that we do to make use of the gospel of John, chapter one, in theology – that is, in talking about what we can understand about God, such as in creation – it would appear that John's inspired writing is in fact with our same focus today of simply pointing to Jesus, based on what John knew of him and as the Holy Spirit gave him revelation. Just to a particular audience. And the central message to that audience was – and is – “there He is! The one.”

Now I want to take our minds and hearts to the mind and heart of a highly intelligent theologian, which is a very interesting exercise. We

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have a tendency to think that such geniuses will not be able to speak to our hearts, and that they are themselves disconnected from their own heart somehow. The current TV show Scorpion is built around that discrepancy and the struggles of social adaptation. But let me turn to just one of those Brainiac theologians whom I happen to know had a deep devotional life. Again from the time of Dragnet, and Sam Shoemaker, and someone I don't think I've ever quoted before in a sermon, that being the existentialist philosopher Paul Tillich. Tillich gave an address once on the first chapter of John. It was entitled: "What Is Truth?" I have to wonder if his audience expected a philosophical treatise. What he did, though, was to show that John the Apostle and Evangelist has singularly focused on the meaning of Truth, such as the verses in Chapter one and which we heard this morning, and then repeated again, proclaiming that this Word which became flesh and dwelt among us did so full "of grace and truth." AND that this same grace and truth came through this very one, Jesus Christ. How does this help our proclamation? Why focus on Truth?

Well, Tillich said,

"It was the Greek mind in which the passionate search for truth was most conspicuous; and it was the Greek world in which, and to which, the Gospel of John was written. The words, here said by Jesus, are... [recalled] by the evangelist who wanted to show the answer of Christianity to the central question of the Hel-leN-ic mind: the question of truth. The answer is given also to us," he said, "for we, too, ask the question of truth. And some of us ask it as passionately, and sometimes as desperately, as the Greeks did."

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In other words, Tillich says John, inspired by the Spirit, was speaking plainly to a culture consumed by the search for Truth, and pointing to JESUS as the embodiment of capital T Truth. You Greeks need look no further. For, as John says, here He is. What wonder and joy should be yours!

You know, it is so amazing to think of a theologian – what a stuffy concept, eh? – speaking in passionate, soul changing language. But for what it was worth, a few years ago I found a quote that told me of the depths of Paul Tillich’s faith in Christ. Here are his words to describe that Holy Spirit moment of his “simply” finding Jesus. Starting with the word, “Suddenly,” he shares how it brought the whole Christmas story into view:

“Suddenly, true reality appears like the brightness of lightening in a formerly dark place. Or, slowly, true reality appears like a landscape when the fog becomes thinner and thinner and finally disappears. New darkneses, new fogs will fall upon you; but you have experienced, at least once, the truth and the freedom given by the truth.

.....In these encounters you may meet the true reality—the truth which liberates from illusions and false authorities, from enslaving anxieties, desires and hostilities, from a wrong self-rejection and a wrong self-affirmation.”

That is from a heart that has been touched by Jesus, by THE TRUTH incarnate. And our hearts are made rich in hearing. It’s the same motivation that got me looking at that medieval theological genius Anselm of Canterbury, as those of you doing your 30 days of prayer for

the days after Christmas have also found. Cerebral, but faith also in the depths of his heart and soul,

You know that spiritual ♪ ♪ “Go tell it on the mountain,” or perhaps restated from our Dragnet story, ♪ ♪ “Go pull him around in your wagon,” is about the simple proclamation of POINTING to the one who is the Truth (and who may be missing from your life). You have it within you to come to Jesus, now; you have it within you to share who he is to you, now. Jesus Christ is born. Share the good news.

Amen.