4 Easter B

April 22, 2018

St. Patrick

**“There is no salvation through anyone else,**

**nor is there any other name under heaven**

**given to the human race by which we are to be saved.”**

 --so St. Peter proudly proclaims about the name of Jesus.

One of my strongest early school memories is concern for “pagan babies.” In each classroom at Little Flower Elementary School in North Memphis we would have collections coordinated by the CSMC, the Catholic Students’ Mission Crusade. The boys would be pitted against the girls—which group would collect the most pennies and nickels—and the monies would be sent to faraway missionaries, in order to aid them in their work of spreading the Gospel and baptizing in the faith. There might be pictures sent to us of children whom we assisted, and at times, we’d be given the chance to name the infant child. There would be impassioned debates about the name, and at times we’d choose an unusual saint about whom we had recently studied in religion class: St. Polycarp, or St. Ignatius.

After graduating from college, I was about to go to graduate school in a seminary mainly peopled by seminarians from the heavily-Catholic New England and Midwest. There were few Southerners in the class. When the class roster was sent out to each student prior to our leaving for school, many of my classmates saw a Tennessean with the name “Valentine” and straightaway concluded that I had been a “pagan baby” aided by their pennies sent to the Southern missions, and some religion class had given me the name after St. Valentine.

**“There is no salvation through anyone else…”** –so the Spirit-led St. Peter pronounced in teaching about the name of Jesus. What happens, then, to all those countless “pagan babies” in faraway lands, as well as devout Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and others—by the millions in our world, and also in our own midst now? In this Bible-Belt South, many a preacher conjures up the image of all of them—in masse—being hurled into hell, unless each confesses that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior.

Earlier this week, a parishioner sent me a YouTube link of a poignant story of a visit of Pope Francis last Sunday to a parish in Rome. As I watched, tears came to my eyes. During this visit, Pope Francis asks the children in the parish if they had any questions for him. One little boy—maybe six or seven—came up to the microphone but couldn’t talk. He broke down weeping into his open hands. Pope Francis invited him to come up to him. Francis embraced him tenderly and was patient. Then the boy whispered into the pope’s ear. For a good amount of time we could see a back-and-forth between pope and boy.

When the boy finished and went back to his chair, Pope Francis identified the boy as Emanuele. He said that the child had given him permission to share what they had talked about. The little boy asked the pope what happened to his father—an atheist—who had recently died. Was his Dad in heaven even if he was an unbeliever?

The boy told the pope that his Dad was a good man who had all four of his children baptized. Pope Francis answered, “A boy that inherited the strength of his father also had the courage to cry in front of all of us. If this man was able to create children like this, it’s true that he is a good man.” Then the pope shared that God decides who goes to heaven, and that God has “the heart of a father.” He asked the other children present if they thought God would abandon a father like Emanuele’s, who was a good man?

“No,” all the children shouted back. “There, Emanuele, *that* is the answer,” the pope said (1).

In this Sunday’s Gospel Jesus says**: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.”**

**“Other sheep”:** Could not those God-fearing Jews and Muslims, and those simply who seek God as earnestly as they can, be included in the **“other sheep”** who are likewise lavishly loved by the Good Shepherd? In fact, official teaching of the Catholic Church specifically says that **“grace works in an unseen way”** in such people of good will (see Gaudium et Spes, #22). Yes, the fold is bigger than the fences we mortals try to confine God’s unseen ways of grace.

**“I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I will lay down my life for the sheep.”** Sisters and brothers: To what extent do we *know* our Good Shepherd—not simply with the head, but in the heart? To what extent do we *know* that this Good Shepherd has laid down his life for *us*, and claims us as his own—not because we’ve earned the claim, but because—we’ll, he’s the Good Shepherd. This Sunday of Easter, let’s give thanks that the sheepfold is bigger than we can imagine, and that the grace of the Good Shepherd works in “unseen ways”—yes, even among us!

1. See Carol Kuruvilla, “Heartsick Boy Asks If Atheist Dad Is In Heaven. Pope Francis Reveals The Answer With A Hug,” in Huffpost.com. (translation into English from Italian provided by Catholic News Service).