

## "The Greatest of these is Love"

Homily of May 9, 2004

by Father Brian Joyce

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This is very unfair, and it is especially terrible on Mother's Day, but I am going to tell you half a joke. And I am only going to tell you the front half. So, if you want to find out the second half, where the punchline is, you are going to have to ask me privately after Mass. .

...Once upon a time the Trinity sat down and they were talking to each other and God the Father said, "We have been working and worrying very hard over the earth. It is time for us to take a little bit of a vacation, a little time off, why don't we go on a trip? Let's go to Jerusalem. And Jesus, the Son of God, jumped up and said, "Wait a minute. I've been there and I didn't like it! I didn't like them and they didn't like me. I had a horrible time there. So, let's not go to Jerusalem..... Let's go to the United States." And God the Father said, "Oh, wait a minute. You know, the United States is fine. They call me 'Father' there some of the time. But now they are always calling me 'Mother.' And I am not comfortable being called 'Mother' just yet. So, let's not go there." That's as far as the joke goes. Sorry. You have to see me later.

As a matter of fact, naming God as mother is not only in the United States. It is worldwide. In fact, the Roman Catholic Catechism talks about the importance of recognizing and endorsing the feminine in God and God as mother so that we realize the love and considerateness and compassion of our God. Today's gospel also does that. Today's gospel underlines the care and compassion of our God and it also answers the question that an awful lot of people keep asking an awful lot of times. The question people keep asking is, bottom line, what must I do to be saved? Or, bottom line, who is going to be saved and who is not going to be saved?

A lot of answers,,,, One answer is "to be saved you have to be a Roman Catholic." Now, this is the answer that Mel Gibson gave recently in an interview. And he is very strong on that. But, you will notice, it excludes billions of people, including Protestant Christians, from salvation. Another group of people, and they tend to be fundamentalist Protestant Christians, say, " You have to explicitly believe in the name of Jesus and if you do that, then you will be saved and if you don't, you won't be." And that excludes, if you didn't notice, billions of people, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists... billions of people.

Today's gospel gives us the bottom line. Very simply, it says, and very directly it answers, "All will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." Simple as that! "If you love one another, you will be my disciples and you will be saved." That's the bottom line, but it ain't easy! That's why we come together in Church and come together for Eucharist so that we can be reminded and challenged and nourished and strengthened so that we can love one another. And

it still isn't easy because we belong to everyone on this planet. And there are so many people you can't reach, ever get to know, just your own circle. And that's not enough. So, through different ministries of our Church we try to reach out. This particular weekend, as we do each year, we have an appeal for Catholic Charities of the East Bay, which reaches far beyond what we can do as individuals or as an individual parish. But I am not going to tell you about their work. I am going to ask a member of their Board of Directors and one of our parishoners, Gwen Watson, to share that with us.... But, I'll be back.

Thank you, Brian, for being a friend to Catholic Charities of the East Bay . I couldn't have chosen a better gospel passage than today's: "This is how all will know that you are my disciples: If you have love for one another." One way we can live out this difficult gospel message of compassion is by participating in the works of Catholic Charities of the East Bay.

As a Mother's Day tribute to mothers struggling to keep their families intact, I'll give a few stories of women who came to Catholic Charities and received help.

An 80-year-old widow, who raised 8 grandchildren and is now raising 3 great-grandchildren, had a stroke 3 weeks ago and because of medical bills hadn't been able to pay her PG&E bills. Catholic Charities not only helped with PG&E but connected her with senior citizen services as well.

An undocumented immigrant woman married to an American was referred to Catholic Charities by the Concord Police because her husband was abusive and punitively fighting to have her deported so he could get custody of the 3 children. Carla, the Immigration Specialist in Catholic Charities' Concord Office, intervened to help her.

Recently, unscrupulous individuals have been collecting money from undocumented immigrants in our own neighborhood along the Monument Boulevard Corridor—falsely promising to provide green cards. Catholic Charities sends its Staff to the neighborhood to warn, educate, and protect these vulnerable Latinos.

A family with 2 children needed rental assistance when the husband was laid off from his job. In addition to rental assistance, Catholic Charities provided employment training so he was enabled to find a job. This family is still among the working poor, but they are now stable, thanks to a hand up from this compassionate organization.

Two years ago Contra Costa County looked for an agency with the reputation and integrity of Catholic Charities to provide housing, education, and services for foster care youth. Kids in foster care who turn 18 regularly become homeless when their foster family's funds are cut off and a new child is placed with that family. The statistics show that 50% of such youth eventually become homeless. So Catholic Charities agreed to partner with the County to provide a home in Pittsburg to house these former foster youth while they continue their education, work part-time

jobs, and acquire life skills training. The name of this program is the CARE Collaborative.

There are many success stories to tell about the 25 young people who have resided in the CARE home. Here's one of them. After nine months in CARE, one young lady with 2 daughters was hired by the California Youth Connection. She also attends college and is a loving mother for her daughters.

A young pregnant mother with 3 children, was brutally assaulted in front of her children. Catholic Charities provided rental assistance for the family and other benefits to keep the children in school as they recovered from the trauma. This young woman is now working and participating in the Victim Witness Program.

Now that you've heard some specific stories, I'd like to emphasize two points: the number of requests are growing and much of the money will remain in our area.

Five of us from Christ the King went to Sacramento two weeks ago to lobby for the poor, under the banner of "We All Belong To Each Other," and we learned about how many of the services the poor depend on were being cut to help balance the State budget.

Due to these governmental cuts, we have seen an increased demand for services to families with children. Catholic Charities needs to increase its funding to help the 12,000 clients who depend on our doors remaining open for them.

Much of the money we collect will stay in our neighborhood: Just outside our parish line is what is believed to be the poorest section in the Bay Area—the Monument Corridor. Catholic Charities is overwhelmed with the number of clients it serves from its Concord Family Service Center. With your help, Catholic Charities can assure that fewer people in our area will be left behind.

Won't you join me in helping Catholic Charities of the East Bay continue to connect us to the discipleship Jesus speaks about in today's gospel: "AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, SO YOU ALSO SHOULD LOVE ONE ANOTHER." Thank You.

Thank you very much, Gwen. You know, I love that Jewish proverb, "God couldn't be everywhere, so God made mothers." But the truth is, to make God's presence and compassion and love alive in this world, God made all of us, all of us, and calls us to be instruments of that love. It's a challenge. It means one on one with your own family, people close to you, people you know well, people you don't like very much. It means love there. It means reaching beyond that, to people who come to us. For example, our St. Vincent dePaul Society meets people every day of the week, in large numbers, at the front door of our house and helps them. Beyond that, it means advocacy for changing systems and policies that hurt people. It means we have to do something about that if we really love. It means politics. Can you believe that? It means politics.

Pope Paul VI said, "The highest form of charity is politics." So we have to think of that, for example, this Monday night, when we look at our State Budget, and you are all invited to that with our Assemblywoman, or when we go into the voting booth. "The highest form of charity is politics." And then we have to reach beyond ourselves in long range ways. And that is what Catholic Charities does. It reaches out to immigrants. It reaches out in family counseling. It reaches out with housing, with employment and job training and so on.

All will know that you are my disciples if you reach beyond yourselves and love one another. May we continue to do that in many ways. May we continue to do that well. Amen.