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OLQP; Georgetown Visitation Monastery

This week my vocation ministry took me to do vocation presentations at a Catholic grade school in Philly. I usually don't present to grade school children, but the invitation came from the leaders of my nieces' school, so I couldn't resist. On one of the breaks, I thought I would visit my sister's-in-law classroom there; she teaches kindergarten. I walked in the room filled with little people furniture, and the students quickly greeted me: "Good Morning, Father." I responded, and felt somewhat important. High school students are hardly this warm; neither are seminarians.

It was snack time—what a great idea, and Diane was making her way around helping the students with their juice boxes, another great idea. Because she teaches kindergarten, Diane has bionic vision and was able to determine that one of her students about 20 feet away was struggling, and she said, "I'll be right there, Walter," not wanting spilled juice all over the carpet.

I thought to myself as I looked at this student with his pumpkin-red hair, "How many Walters can there be in the world at this age?" I remembered baptizing my old neighbor's son whom I haven't seen in five or six years. I went over to Walter who was focusing on his Doritos because he couldn't get to his juice box. I crouched down and introduced myself. Unimpressed, Walter simply said, "Hi, Father." I asked him if his name was Walter Dennis Fox, and he said, "Yes, Father," again unimpressed that I would know both his middle and last name. He went back to his Doritos. I told him that I baptized him. More Doritos. Then, I asked if he had a sister Abigail whom I also baptized. "Yes, Father." Back to the Doritos. I finally asked if his parents were Karen and Dennis, whom I married. "Yes, Father." Finally, I asked, "Walter, what do you think that I was the priest who married your parents and baptized you and your sister." He looked at my long and simply said, "Father, would you like some Doritos?"

I think that young Walter gives us some insight into the Liturgy of the Word today. It cannot be any clearer than what we heard from the Book of Sirach. "The Lord is a God of justice who knows no favorites." Only our gentle and generous God could not have any favorites. Isn't it just plain human nature to have favorites? But it is not in God's nature, thank God. My brother Tom and I always joke that my brother Joe is my Mom's favorite; she vehemently denies these charges. I know as a teacher, try as I did, I tended to like certain students more than others. I think we are attracted to certain people in our communities more than others. But not with our God!

I am not so sure that I was trying to impress young Walter, but I did want to connect with him. And, we certainly had a pretty special connection. Now, while I am betting that he offered me some of his Doritos to shut me up, I think he is on to something. Looking at his response, I think he saw me not as a priest, not even the long-ago friend of his parents. I was just a man, and he offered to share his food with me.

Is this the faith of a child that Jesus hails so powerfully elsewhere in the gospel? Imagine the type of justice that we would be able to advance if we encountered people just as they are: People who are our brothers and sisters, people who are as human as we are, people whose dignity is as strong and **as vulnerable** as ours. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why God has no favorites, he just views us all the same. No wonder ours is a God of justice.

In responding to the needs of others, do we pay too much attention to our favorites and our non-favorites?

We sang in response to the first reading, “The Lord hears the cry of the poor.” Who among us is crying? I sometimes wonder if we are able to hear their cries and see their tears:

The poor among us who are struggling with depression.

The broken-hearted among us who feel so darn alone.

The hungry among us who are starving for affection or acceptance.

The frightened among us who tremble at violence of one more rejection.

When we sing and pray that the Lord hears the cry of the poor, **we are acknowledging that we are the ears of God.** We are called to listen to those crying around us.

Yet, sometimes we may listen only to the powerful or pretty, the popular or prestigious, or those who just reflect our personal preferences.

I am beginning to wonder about the power of “categories” that prevents us from hearing the cries of so many different poor people in our lives. Those random and different boxes that we put people into that deafen us to hearing their needs.

“She’s crazy, we might say.

He is lazy.

They are helpless.

They are not our responsibility.

They aren’t our citizens.

They are sinners.

If we do not pay attention to the tears of the world, we may drown in them without even knowing it is happening. This, too, would be an injustice. It would also be a sad cause of our death.

As I conclude, I would like to return to Walter.

Countless young Walters go home after school to tell their parents that they are hungry, and they are fed. It is so normal that kids get hungry and their parents feed them. But, Walters’ peers in another part of his city may not ever be fed. 13 million children in our country experience hunger because they are part of the 10 percent of American households where hunger is served for dinner. In our world, 25,000 people die every day because of hunger. When the children of God—including the adult children of God---are

hungry for food and affection and healing and a home, we cry out to anyone who will listen. No matter what the cause of our hunger and no matter what we are hungry for, we cry out. Do we hear ourselves crying? After all, we are the ears and the eyes of the God of Justice.

God has no favorites; do we?