

**August 27, 2006**

I normally don't tell blonde jokes. But sometimes one comes along that's really funny. A certain young lady called her boyfriend and said, "Please come over and help me . . . I have a jigsaw puzzle and I can't figure out how to get it started." Her boyfriend asked, "What is it supposed to be when it's finished?" The young woman says, "According to the picture on the box, it's a tiger." Her boyfriend decided to stop by and help with the puzzle. She showed him where she had the pieces spread all over the table. He studied the pieces for a moment, then looked at the box, then turned to her and said, "First of all, no matter what we do, we're NOT going to be able to assemble these pieces into anything resembling a tiger." Then, he took her hand and said, "And second, just relax. Let's have a cup of coffee, and then, well, then we can just put all the Sugar Frosted Flakes back in the box."

I thought that joke was appropriate because it's about puzzles. And puzzles are really a good metaphor for what we're all about here at St. Peter's. After all, let's face it, life is a puzzle. Relationships are puzzles. The search for purpose can be a puzzle. And faith is certainly a puzzle—a puzzle that we spend the better part of our lives trying to put together.

Now, even the most expert puzzle fan knows that it's much easier to put together a puzzle if you first look at the picture on the box. It's the guide to helping you make sense of all those hundreds of little, disjointed pieces.

Well, the author of John's Gospel had seen the picture on the front of that puzzling box called "faith" and he was trying to convey that picture to us. What the author of John tried to show us is that life doesn't have to be random, meaningless and empty. Because God has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ. And with Christ as our guiding image, we can not only make it through all the confusion of life. We can find purpose and fulfillment and hope. That is the message of the book of John.

John opens his Gospel with this declaration about Jesus: "In him was life, and that life was the light of men." Two chapters later, he records Jesus' encounter with an elderly man named Nicodemus. When Nicodemus is slow to understand how he, an old man, can experience a second birth, Jesus vows him with this promise: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The author of John believed he had found the key to life! And what John said is, if you want to know the purpose of life, look to Jesus.

In today's Gospel reading, John is writing about a time in Jesus' ministry when the crowds were starting to fade away. Jesus' teachings were too hard for them. They challenged too many preconceived notions about faith and meaning and especially the role of the law in our lives. His ministry, which had once seemed so promising, was in trouble.

And in this challenging time, Jesus turned to the twelve who had been with him from the beginning and asked them, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" The answer from Simon Peter was one of the most beautiful statements in the scriptures, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.*" Peter knew, as did John, that Jesus is the picture on the box. He is the key to the puzzle of life. Problem is, growing up in a culture that has already (supposedly) solved that puzzle and already embraces the values that Jesus proclaimed sometimes blinds us to Christ's call to us.

It's true. Suppose we lived in a culture where you were not supposed to help the poor because they were being punished for misdeeds in a prior life. Or a culture in which your enemy was not only someone you were to despise, but someone your children and your children's children were to despise. In those circumstances, we would view Christ's call to live with compassion and respect and forgiveness as being much more dramatic. Much more revolutionary. In fact, maybe it's just impossible for us to objectively view our own faith because so much of what we hold as true has been affected by the Christian values in our culture. For example, we just assume the values of love and respect for all people are true. That's how we've been raised. But we were raised that way because of the influence of Jesus. So sometimes it is difficult to evaluate our faith, because it is so close to us . . . so much a part of who we are. But I'd like to try this morning. And to do that I want to ask a question. Why are you here?

Have you come because, "Well . . . it's our tradition? That's just what we do?" Or have you come to see your friends? Have you come because you enjoy the music? All of these are important. But, if any of these are the one critical reason you're here today, you are probably not going to have a truly uplifting experience. Because reasons like that for worship, in one theologian's words, reveal that our religion is "more a theory than a love affair." More a theory than a love affair. Is your faith more a theory than a love affair with God? I hope you are here today because you have a love for God that is rooted in the knowledge that God loved you first. I hope you are here because you have found that Christ has the words of eternal life, and that hearing those words, reading, learning, marking and inwardly digesting those words brings you closer to an understanding of God in your life. I hope that is why you're here today.

Malcolm Muggeridge accompanied a film crew to India in order to narrate a documentary on the late Mother Teresa. He already knew she was a good woman. But when he met her he found a good woman who was also so very compelling that he titled his documentary, Something Beautiful for God. When he remarked to Mother Teresa on the fact that she went to mass every day at 4:30 a.m. she replied, "If I didn't meet my master every day, I'd be doing no more than social work."

Whatever reason you had for coming here today, I hope that what you find is what the author of our Gospel reading for today wanted us to find: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."