

BE PEACE
Randall Tremba
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World Communion Sunday
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Mark 10:2-16

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God, as a little child will never enter it. And Jesus took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

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Once upon a time Jesus and his disciples were arguing the morality of marriage, divorce and remarriage with his critics, not unlike arguments currently underway in the Vatican. The Scriptures say this, said one. But they also say this, said Jesus and then Jesus realized this argument was a no win situation. It was going nowhere. He then noticed a few children nearby. He took them in his arms and blessed them. Argument over.

I'll get back to that, but first I'd like to tell you about a blessing I received in the mail this past Thursday.

I received a letter from a reader of my recent *GOOD NEWS PAPER* essay—"Pot, Porn and Fox News." In that essay I called out that news outlet for fear mongering. The letter accused me of being vicious, hateful, rude, self-righteous, arrogant, divisive, condescending, liberal, snide, sophomoric, (that hurt!), and a disgrace to the name of Christ. And that was just the first page!

The author signed off with these gracious words: "Yours, in Christ." But there was no signature, no name and no return address. Anonymous or not, that letter made my day.

I LOVE FAN MAIL.

The author was also considerate enough to send a copy to every minister in town just in case my colleagues didn't already know those things about me. Anonymous or not, I don't resent the criticism one bit. I only wish the author had included contact information, because I would like to contact him or her as I have the other 10 or so people who called or emailed me with complaints and rebukes.

If I could, I would commend the author for being perceptive for, in fact, I am really and truly vicious, hateful, rude, self-righteous, arrogant, divisive, condescending, liberal, snide, sophomoric, and a disgrace to the name of Christ. Not all the time; but certainly some of the time.

And I suspect my essay might have been one of those times. I was hoping nobody would notice, but obviously some did and were kind enough to let me know, in most cases because they truly care about me and my reputation for being a bridge builder. "Why must you take sides?" several asked.

I personally thanked each and every one for helping me see things more clearly and helping me understand myself a little better. After all, there's always more than one way to say things—some more kind than others. As the Buddhists put it: *It's OK to announce, but don't denounce, for denouncing is a form of violence.* Or, as the Apostle Paul put it: *Speak the truth in love.*

In this case anger got the best of me. It's OK to be angry. But it's not OK for anger to get the best of us.

As a matter of fact, as I was finishing the writing of that essay, I suddenly realized my own hypocrisy and inserted this confession near the end: "I'm sometimes just like these others who foment fear and hatred." But many readers bristling with anger over the "Pot, Porn and Fox News" combo never got that far or if so, simply missed what was relatively small print. It was, after all, a short sentence.

Just before that letter arrived I had been reading our Vietnamese Buddhist monk friend Thich Naht Hahn's classic: *Being Peace* in which he says: "If we align ourselves with one side or the other, we will lose our chance to work for peace." And then he says this: "Be peace, don't just talk about."

Be peace before you try to make peace. Breathe in peace; breathe out fear, guilt and shame. Breathe in love; breathe out hatred and bigotry.

And here's something else from that book: "If in our daily life we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone, will profit from it. This is the most basic kind of peace work."

And he offers this daily practice: "Breathe in calm; breathe out smiles."

Jesus breathed in calm and breathed out smiles. Jesus breathed and lived in peace. I'm guessing Jesus was smiling when he blessed the little children. A scowling Jesus would have sent the children flying.

Breathe in calm; breathe out smiles.

According to the lesson for today, the disciples spoke sternly to those who tried to bring children to Jesus. Jesus, just like us, had a lot more important things to do, or so they thought. But Jesus rebuked them: *Let the little children come to me; do not stop them.*

There's more to this than inviting little children into our presence. It's also about inviting that which can be annoying, irritating or interrupting of our well-guarded lives. This isn't just about children. This is a lesson in acceptance as taught in *Being Peace*.

Be careful, say the Buddhists, about rejecting things you don't like or want in your life. Learn to accept and if possible embrace. Embrace darkness; embrace suffering; embrace criticism and let it be. For darkness and suffering are our teachers, too.

Let the little children come to me; do not stop them. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

And that brings us to Pope Francis and his winsome smile. Pope Francis was at the "Festival of Families" in Philadelphia a week ago Saturday. If you missed it live, I urge you to watch in on YouTube.

That night he set aside his prepared speech that he would have held in front of his mouth and eyes as he read. Instead he set it down, and with a radiant countenance, sparkling eyes and a jovial smile he spoke from the heart.

That night he blessed families of all sorts without qualification. He blessed the elderly, the grandparents who hold memories and wisdom. He blessed the children who hold our strength. And he blessed all of us in between. He poked a little fun at himself for pontificating about families when he himself was not married or a parent of children. And then he smiled, as did everyone else.

If in our daily life we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone will profit from it. This is the most basic kind of peace work.

The Pope can't fix the whole world or even the Roman church. In fact, earlier that week he stumbled badly by aggravating divisions instead of building a bridge. Still, he can

build bridges, he can open doors, he can offer smiles. For he like his name sake St. Francis knows how to *be peace* before trying to *make it*.

Breathe in calm. Breathe out smiles.