

*The Homiletical Question: What does the Holy Spirit want the People of God to understand from these readings on this occasion?*

*“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and be well fed,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what good is that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2:14-17)*

Works of compassion figure prominently in our readings today. Heartless treatment of the poor and afflicted, supposing that somehow we are above them will not go unnoticed by God. So says our first reading. Faith that does not bear fruit in compassionate action is not faith at all, according to our second reading. Often misunderstood as a rebuke, the gospel today has Jesus sarcastically parroting the prevailing presumption that God could not possibly care for the plight of the Syrophenician woman: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” he says. She counters his statement of prevailing belief with a cheeky rejoinder, “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Beware of the arrogance of your assumptions, the scriptures warn us, for God’s love embraces all.

The choice is not between faith and works as some would have it. At its worst faith can devolve into saccharine pietism, dogmatic rigidity, and the mere following of rules. Isaiah mocked the priests and the prophets of Samaria because of their hardness of heart. Their faith, he said, amounted to “precept upon precept, precept upon precept, rule upon rule, rule upon rule, here a little, there a little” (Isaiah 28:13). There is no end to it. Works at its best results in performance anxiety and in the end they both meet up at the bottom of the same theological rabbit hole. The real choice is between our awareness of God’s loving presence within us and within other people, and non-awareness. How we respond, whether with a humble thankfulness bearing fruit in service or with self-righteousness hubris, makes all the difference.

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words, that showing is more effective than telling. A wonderful new novel *Agatha of Little Neon* by Claire Luchette does a marvelous job of demonstrating how God draws us on to growth in love. She does this in short incremental chapters showing God’s love in action in unexpected ways.

In the novel four young contemplative nuns under thirty find themselves running a Mountain Dew-colored halfway house in Woonsocket, Rhode Island—Little Neon. Their old convent in Lackawanna, New York, is forced to close because the diocese there has “gone broke” fending off lawsuits due to pedophilia scandals. Quirky but memorable characters abound, from the nuns themselves to a male parolee nick-named “Baby,” two female heroin addicts known as “Horse” and “Lawn Mower Jill” to Tim Gary, whose jaw disfigured by cancer prevents him from finding love. As Agatha immerses herself in her strange new environment, new realities are forced upon her and she becomes painfully aware of her own naivete, about the church, its male leadership, and about what she has been taught to believe. We are reminded that institutions in themselves, lack the power to save and that they sometimes get in the way of

what they are supposed to be about. Ultimately God's love is mediated through individuals—even the strangest and most broken of people. We see how Agatha learns that.

The author notes, *“My goal in writing this book was to make the point that...saying that you have love for all creatures and actually showing love for all creatures are totally different things. I wanted the sisters to have to learn that... [that] centering on the other person's needs is really hard work.”*

The story is one of transformative growth, of *metanoia* in its truest form. Maybe the events and struggles of the past year and a half are challenging us to grow in much the same way. God's ways are mysterious.

We live in a world of unparalleled extremes: of wealth and poverty, secularism and spiritual hunger, climate change and denial, of vaccination and anti-vaxxers, of natural disasters and indifference to those who are suffering. Should I assist those in the south reeling from Hurricane Ida; those suffering from the storms in the northeast? Should I give aid to the earthquake victims in Haiti? What about those dying here? It's all more than I can handle! It can be tempting to draw inward to shut it all out.

Our choice is not between faith and works. The real choice is between our awareness of God's loving presence within other people and indifference. Reluctant to leave the comfort of childhood faith, one of the sisters in the novel asks why, if they were originally called to a contemplative life, they should now end up serving the needs of complete strangers in a halfway house. A fellow character responds by saying, “Goodness is somewhere deep down inside everyone... your job is to give them hope.” In doing what we can, in whatever way we can, at any time we can, according to our means, together let us instill that sense of hope.

Emil+