

Discover joy in tedious waiting

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Among the wonderful comic routines to which my friend Father Tom Powers frequently treats us are his stories about waiting to check out in the supermarket. His basic premise is that for the customer just ahead of him, the need to pay comes as a total surprise. Further, the surprise dawns only after the individual's purchases are bagged and ready to go. You need no special gift of imagination to guess at the way Tom spins out his stories. You've been in those lines. You know.

He never tells the story the same way twice, but we, his faithful listeners, have learned some of the consistent elements in his tales about the people ahead of him in line. See if those elements square with your own experience: a shift change for the check-out clerk, a price check on at least one item, the presentation of a batch of coupons, the unhurried search for checkbook or wallet, a similar leisurely probe for the shopper's discount card, the slow counting out of the exact change with which to pay the bill, the equally unhurried replacement of coins in the wallet, and the relocation of wallet in pocket or purse.

In addition to this basic scenario, Tom offers another his experiences in the express lanes of the same markets. (To give you some hint of his disposition, let me tell you that when the person ahead of him in an express lane checks out a dozen eggs, Tom counts it as 12 items!) And, as a variation on a theme, he has



A LONG THE WAY

great stories of his experiences of people ahead of him in line at thruway toll booths.

I appreciate Tom's humor about such things because it is a wonderful reminder of how easily I can let such experiences take on a level of significance in my life that they simply do not deserve. When I get testy inside because my wait in line at the market or at the thruway booth is longer than I would like it to be, I think of Tom's routine. When I do, I laugh and actually begin to enjoy the moment. And I keep my eyes open for new events he can add to his stories.

Advent brings the story to mind because this lovely season invites us to consider time in a manner much different from the way we tend to consider it in our often frantic and hurried lives. We are invited to draw

close to the story, the mystery of God's saving ways among us. The story of our salvation in Christ unfolds over long ages. It bespeaks development and fidelity, patience and compassion, triumph and failure. It is rich and varied and totally unpredictable.

It's just such qualities as these that can make it so difficult for our culture to respond to the invitation to find the love and compassion of God in the long series of events and encounters through which God lavishes divine love upon us.

It's not that we don't care about such things. Indeed, I think the opposite is true. But I do believe that cultural forces drive us very strongly. And I think one of those forces is the pressure of time. We can all too easily let ourselves become victims to the tyranny of clock and calendar. And when we do that, we deprive ourselves of the capacity to be touched by the timeless, lasting realities that truly give life.

So, thanks to Tom, I can honestly tell you that the time I spend waiting in lines is no longer burdensome. Now it's fun because I use it to enjoy the humor in human affairs, to put things into perspective and to be in touch, however briefly, with things that really matter to me.

If you find yourself impatient about waiting in line during this busy season, or experience the equivalent in your life, I hope you'll be able to find a way of discovering some joy in it.

Thanks Tom.

Peace to all.

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