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The Power of Innocence

I've been watching puppy for the past two weeks. Emily, the long-haired miniature dachshund, new addition to our household, is now ten weeks old. I am tempted to re-name her Her Royal Highness Emily, for she has taken over everything – evicted the other two dogs from their bed where she lies in lone splendor, bullied the others into playing when they obviously don't want to, snuggled down into a lap for a long snooze, looking at you with those limpid eyes empty of all guile, knowing nothing of the perfidy of the universe. No one has hurt her yet (well, other than a couple of inadvertent stepping on a tail) and I hope no one ever does. It's rejuvenating to watch her discover the wonder of a dried up stick, the amazing properties of a ragged, dirty tennis ball, the fascination of growing grass in the backyard. It is the gift of innocence in a world that has little of it.

Babies, of course, do the same thing, and more, for us. Babies are in that same state of innocence where everything is a wonder, everything is on your side, nothing will hurt you, everyone is a doting aunt or uncle. It's one of the reasons we all love to have babies around; they change our world, remind us of what used to be, bring to mind a better world, call us to act to protect that innocence as long as possible, call us to join God-in-Christ in re-making our world into the Paradise of God, a safe place for innocence. It is why we cry when we read those newspaper stories of horrendous abuse and death of babies and children. Such things ought never to be.

Yesterday I saw that innocence in a place I had not expected it. I was standing at the deathbed of our friend, John Baumann, as family and friends gathered around him to administer the Last Rites of the Church. John had died unexpectedly about an hour earlier in St Jude Hospital, from what we think was a heart attack. As we said the prayers and stayed around him for a couple of hours to comfort Nancy, Jeffrey, and one another, I saw in his face the same innocence that we see in the face of a baby, in the eyes of a puppy, in all the babies of the world, whatever their species. When our life is ended, we lose the pain and treachery of the world and enter once again into the innocence of childhood, into the place that God always meant to be, into the Paradise where no snake has intruded.

This is what Jesus must have meant when he said that we all must accept God and His ways as a little child does (Matthew 18.1-5). God's kingdom is that place where innocence is not betrayed, where we all laugh as children, where we expect good rather than evil, joy rather than pain.

I think this is the extraordinary power of innocence. It makes all things possible. The limitations of expectation are removed, for we enter a world where what we never expected is commonplace: death is defeated, life is triumphant, we find God in the most unexpected places like bread and wine, the touch of another, a quiet moment. The power of innocence explains

what happens to us, if we let it, as we age into retirement and the wisdom of old age; it doesn't happen to everyone, but it does happen to many, the innocence of childhood renewed in the wisdom of long life. (Proverbs 9.1-6) The power of innocence strengthens us to let go of the drunkenness of the world and to live intoxicated by God's Spirit instead. The power of innocence lets us give "thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Ephesians 15.15-20)

I suspect the power of innocence is why the Church discovered the sinlessness of Jesus. Ultimate Innocence, which is God, is the only explanation for the existence of the world and the work of Jesus. In the innocence of love, God made a world without treachery, a world lost through the betrayal of Her children who refused to love Him properly. God made Jesus through the loving acceptance of a peasant girl, strengthened by the protection of a simple carpenter, and poured His own self into that human baby. Ultimate Innocence now began transforming a world where innocence had been long lost. Someday, whether here or hereafter, we will live in a world where innocence is the norm, not the exception; where we approach one another in expectation rather than in defensiveness; where "puppy love" is not betrayed into jaded cynicism; where God can live among us without the possibility of crucifixion; where we can give away all that we have and end up with more than we started with; where we see true love rather than manipulation.

Innocence and its power are gifts from God, but they are also something we can work for in our lives and in our world. Those are not contradictory ideas. God sometimes gives us unexpected and unearned gifts and at other times She hitches a ride on something already going on in our lives. So we can ask God for the unearned gift of innocence, but we must be prepared for being led into unexpected, surprising, perhaps even frightening, places. And we can decide to work for innocence, to choose transparency rather than cynicism, to choose good will rather than selfish aggrandizement, to choose work in God's kingdom rather than laboring for what passes away, to give ourselves away rather than hold on to everything, to trust rather than to ignore, to choose love rather than indifference, to give ourselves to God.

In our quest for innocence and its power for our lives, it helps to look for innocence already in our world, in our babies, in our elderly, in our puppies and kittens, even in baby snakes and spiders (ugh! That's a hard one for me.). When we look at these innocents, we well may see the Innocent on the Cross, the power that changes the world.

Be innocent, wise as doves, subtle as serpents (Matthew 10.16). And pray for Emily to discover soon the difference between piddling in the kitchen and piddling in the backyard. Peace and Innocence, Amen.