

## THE INCLUSIVITY OF MY CHRISTIAN FAITH – JUST BEING NICE

Good morning. My name is Rosemary, preferably known as Ro, Nicolosi.

I began wondering about the inclusivity of my Christian faith a long time ago. And, over the last 50 years or so, this concept has definitely morphed and taken on various, different meanings. This morning, I'd like to share a little bit about what this journey has meant to me.

When I was about 10 years old, I remember asking my mother about Peggy, my first cousin Bobby's wife. "Mama, why is Peggy so mean to Aunt Fran?" (Aunt Fran was Bobby's mom, my mother's sister, who struggled with cognitive disabilities.) "I mean, Mama, Peggy goes to church more than once a week! I thought that made her a good person. Why isn't she NICE to Aunt Fran?" My mother told me it was something about the in-law thing but I knew at that time, that if you believed in Jesus, you were supposed to believe in his Golden Rule too. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* While my church was not very big on teaching the Bible, I knew some stuff. And I wondered, wasn't Jesus inclusive of people with disabilities?

My father was pretty involved in our church and we would hang out at a monastery in our town sometimes on Saturdays. In fact, my most treasured memory of those trips was catching pollywogs in a little pond that was on the property. (*Do you know what a pollywog is?*) Sometimes the monks and priests would come to our house for Sunday dinner. Right after church, my family would stop at the bakery to buy hot bread, and then run home to get ready for our visitors. My mother was relegated to the kitchen where she remained for most of the afternoon. If you know anything about an Italian Sunday dinner, this was a full afternoon event – usually taking place from about 1 to 4pm – with an abundance of extra food prepared in case a stray visitor just showed up. (That made for great leftovers.) The men would sit and talk for hours, consuming unfathomable quantities of wine. Generally, I loved our Sunday marathon dinners but not so much when these particular visitors were in attendance. On those days, my sister and I would be required to sit at the table for maybe 3 hours or so while the men would talk about everything under the sun. We were really expected to just listen. And, if we tried to chime in, it was pretty much a guarantee that we would be ignored. So, I would sit and daydream and ask myself, "Why are these men of the cloth not more inviting....or not being really very NICE to me and my sister? Don't they do God's work?" And I wondered, wasn't Jesus inclusive of all genders and ages?

My struggle with my faith and its inclusivity really hit the skids in 2008 when I began to envision the baptism of my yet-to-be-born child. Stemming from this struggle and prior to Gabriel's birth, I made the hard decision that I needed to shop for a new church which would agree to, and in fact celebrate, the baptism of a child with 2 moms.

Well, this turned out to be a delightful process. I met some wonderful people and learned about different types of Christianity in Episcopal, UCC, Unitarian, and Presbyterian churches. As I spent time in these places, I began to hone in on what was truly important to me – and that was inclusivity – in all realms. I worshiped at a Presbyterian church, and for the first time in my

life, with a woman pastor! And, I entered many a church adorned with the Rainbow Flag. Often, I heard about the need to focus on the marginalized people in our world. I was so excited to begin to feel acceptance, intellectually and personally, in a faith community. Now, the hard job was ahead.....to pick the place!

Instrumental in my finding this home for Gabriel and me was the influence of his 2 adopted "aunties", Mary McGibbon and Joanne Linder. Mary is here today. Thank you Mary. And I know Joanne is watching from above. Thank you Joanne. I am so grateful for them introducing us to TPC. What started with me hitting the skids evolved into an upward and beautiful journey into this community where I have felt loved, respected, and **INCLUDED**.

Over the last 10 years (minus a short few in the middle), the experiences that Gabriel and I have had at TPC have been life changing. The main reason we joined TPC was for the many vibrant children's programs offered by our church (thank you Jenness). Gabriel has been a happy camper each summer at BeeTree; he looks forward to this coming summer's weekend faith adventure to Massanetta Springs in Virginia with hundreds of other middle-schoolers; and for many years now he has tolerated me being one of his teachers in his Sunday school class as he has learned about our faith. (And, thank you to Kim Whittle who leads this charge and makes me look good. Of course, she won't hear my accolades because she is in the classroom right now!) Gabriel has made friends with children and adults alike. I have seen him grow as he asks pressing questions about God's presence in our lives and I look forward to his many years of spiritual discovery ahead.

And, in addition to Gabriel, I have found community here too. I have been happy to work and socialize with many like-minded people. I have participated with and led book groups dissecting great works about our faith. (Thank you to Kelly Joffe, Jill Thomas, and Alison Peer for teaching me how to do it right.) I have become an active contributor to our mission of social justice, attending workshops on dismantling racial inequity (yay to my partners Judy Rice and Patty Rath), and lobbying in Annapolis with Mothers Demand Action to pass sensible gun reforms, to name just a few of these social justice activities. Sunday Community Lunch is another place I have been able to offer my service and interact with many different folks. Last week, about 32 church and community members enjoyed a delicious feast of chicken parmigiana, pasta, green bean casserole, lentil soup, salad, and an assortment of Graul's Market desserts. The food was prepared with love by my dedicated team, Lettuce Serve You. Thanks to Jen Bolster for her unbelievable leadership and great menus and recipes!

Recently, I joined the Adult Spiritual Formation Committee. We are working on some exciting programs to bring faith deeper into the lives of church members and, I know this effort will ultimately help my faith to grow. (I am excited to work with my pal, Ross Bregel, as well as so many other great folks.) The Diner's Club and the Prayer Buddy programs have given me great opportunities to make really good friends. Dotsie Bregel and I continue to pray together even though we are far past the Lenten season. And lastly, I have spent the last 2-1/2 years in service as a Deacon following the excellent direction of Pat Keller, Jim Kuhlman, and now Mary Blann. Nothing has been more rewarding for my faith development. Visiting the homebound and

serving them communion (with my team-mate Kristi Burkett) has been a special privilege that I have been afforded in this role, as well as so much else. Really, I am thankful to be able to work with all the caring Deacons. Susan Shockley and I are still trying to figure out where to buy the best pair of jeans. And, my Sunday is not the same if I don't receive a loving hug from Anne Miller. If only I had time to acknowledge everyone who has made an impact on me!

So, in reflection. I am forever grateful to Gabriel's adopted "auntie's" for introducing me to TPC. I am grateful to Rob and Joel for helping us all to create a great community of faith in which Gabriel and I get to participate. I am grateful for my many REALLY NICE friends in our church group. And, I am more than thankful to have found a path on which I have been easily able to welcome God into my heart. I am so grateful to have found INCLUSIVITY, that inclusivity which always seemed so mysterious and elusive to me before TPC.

Merry Christmas to everyone! Thanks for listening.