

Mercy in Ordinary Times

(Column 17: September 16, 2019)

By Lucia A. Silecchia

Every now and then, an ordinary, brief vignette – perhaps unremembered by the stars of that drama – can show the face of God in our everyday lives. Recently, two tourists treated me to such a gift.

A young boy, about 4 or 5, was energetically trotting next to his Dad. They were obviously tourists, walking with haste a few paces ahead of me on a recent morning when they were off to go sightseeing and I was heading to work. The real indication of their tourist status was the small plastic snow globe that the boy held in his hand. He shook it with great fascination as the water and glitter that filled it swirled around what was likely a scene of a famous landmark or two.

The boy's Dad quietly cautioned him to be careful not to drop the globe because it could break. In spite of this warning, the boy shook the globe with ever-greater energy. What may have started as a gentle, swirling snowstorm in that bubble became a tiny blizzard of epic proportion. Alas, one shake was made with slightly too much enthusiasm and the globe slipped out of the boy's hand. When cheap plastic hits hard cement, predictable events unfold. The top of the globe snapped free of the bottom and the water, glitter and globe lay messily at the boy's feet.

I vividly remember the look on the boy's face when this happened. He looked down at the mess and then up at his Dad with an expression that we all likely know. As adults, most of us have mastered the poker face that comes more easily to adults than small children. Yet, even if it does not appear on our faces, the boy's familiar look of despair, regret, and fear is familiar. It is that feeling that comes when ignoring good advice and doing the unwise has consequences that can make any of us feel as though the world – or our little corner of it – has been shattered beyond repair. The look on that boy's face was the look in the heart of anyone who regrets a mistake that has destroyed something precious, who fears having disappointed a loved one, or who doubts that something broken can ever be repaired. It is the look in the heart of anyone who has genuinely sought another's forgiveness, and the look in the soul of anyone who has turned to God for pardon and peace after a path unwisely chosen.

More vividly, though, I remember the reaction of the Dad. He could have said, "*I told you so.*" He could have yelled about the cost of the bauble or griped about the time lost cleaning it up. He could have stayed silent but worn that withering look of exasperation which is often far more devastating. But he did not. He knelt down next to his son and said, "*We'll fix it.*" He snapped the broken top and bottom of the globe together. He pulled a tissue out of his pocket to blot up some of the glitter water and handed the globe back to his son. They continued on their way.

The globe was certainly not the same. There was no more swirling snow. Yet, in the eyes of that child, his little world was – literally – back together again.

I will likely never see them again. But, in the Dad's reaction to his son were two lessons for ordinary time. First, it illustrated that love God has for those who come to Him with sorrow, despair, and regret for mistakes made and paths unwisely chosen. There may be consequences of actions that cannot be easily undone or repaired in this world, just as the glitter never made its way back into the globe. However, the relationship with God is not one of those irremediable casualties. As that Dad told his son, "we'll fix it."

Second, it was a reminder of how important the love of adults is to the children entrusted to their care. I hope the compassionate love that this boy received from his Dad in this trivial matter will sustain him later in life when his mistakes may be bigger and their consequences graver. I hope that knowing loving mercy in small things will help him to admit mistakes, seek forgiveness, and repair relationships that his later mistakes may harm. For so many, it is the example of adults – especially parents – who are a child's first glimpse into the love of God. What an awesome responsibility it is to be that first loving and merciful embrace that a child knows – and what a great loss it is for those who never know it.

I am grateful that this scene played itself out on a busy sidewalk a few paces ahead of me. I am grateful for the look of a boy that reminded me of that weak vulnerability that is part of flawed humanity. But, I am most grateful for the example of a loving Dad who reminded me anew of God's merciful love toward us who muddle imperfectly through ordinary times.

Lucia A. Silecchia is a Professor of Law at the Catholic University of America. "On Ordinary Times" is a biweekly column reflecting on the ways to find the sacred in the simple. Email her at silecchia@cua.edu.