

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B — 30th June 2024

I am pretty sure you are familiar with Oreo cookies. The cookies are dark brown, crunchy, and a bit salty. And the filling inside is white, creamy, and sweet. When you bite them, there is that explosion of contrasting flavours which makes you take another bite again and again. It becomes so addictive that you don't realize you have consumed the whole packet.

Our gospel reading today is like that. The story of the sick little girl sandwiched the story of the haemorrhaging woman. It is like cowboy movies where two bandits in black and white hats are having a pistol duel. The sound effects are heightening the intensity of the situation then suddenly you are taken to another scene, the subplot back at the ranch. Such dovetailing of scenes gives flow to the story and heightens the suspense.

Scripture scholars call it "the sandwich technique." One story is nested within another story; both stories are about the same topic. Today's gospel is a classic example of such dovetailing. The story of the woman with the haemorrhage is sandwiched in the middle of the story about curing the little girl.

And both of the interwoven stories deal with faith. Sandwiching one story within another adds the flavour of contrast, an Oreo cookie. The aggressive faith of the haemorrhaging woman is contrasted with the reluctant faith of the little girl's family. By contrasting the two, the women's faith is made all the brighter; the crowd's lack of faith all the darker. The Oreo cookie effect.

The people in gospel stories are images of ourselves. The contrast of faith in the characters of this gospel is our own struggle with faith. As the trusting woman, we have all known moments of secure faith. And much like the crowd who gave up on the little girl, we have also had our lingering doubts.

Faith and doubt have been sandwiched in our own lives. Now the tension between the two is a healthy dynamic. Faith speaks to doubt, and doubt speaks to faith. We instinctively know the blessings of a secure faith. We need to appreciate that doubting can be a means to a deeper faith. An unexamined faith easily degenerates into superstition.

While modern Catholics accept the core of their faith, they also have doubts. The Catholic Catechism may seem to some like a medieval relic in a modern secular world. If we find some teachings of the church troublesome, we gain nothing by discarding those teachings. We need to engage our doubts. When we struggle with those truths which we find difficult, we enrich our faith.

Secular science offers a model here. Science does not give up on a troublesome problem. A scientific discovery which is disturbing, which does not fit, is the one that demands reconsideration and leads to a new and deeper understanding of the foundations of that science. Technology progresses because scientists, instead of running away from troublesome questions, are constantly seeking them out. Catholics, likewise, need to accept the challenge of difficult and irksome doctrines of our faith.

The teachings of our church are often unpopular. That was true in the first century. It is true in the 21st century. The Catholic position on the beginning of life and the end of life, nuclear war and economic justice, marriage and family, disturb many. These teachings are not arbitrary. They are rooted in the gospel and have developed consistently through the centuries. It would be irresponsible to the heritage of our faith, and to the integrity of our own conscience, to dismiss them as outdated and adopt the prevailing secular culture. We need rather to engage in the struggle to understand them and to integrate them into our total faith.

The contrast of faith and doubt in today's gospel story is about our own faith struggles. Your faith may be secure and calm on the home front, but "meanwhile back at the ranch," the guys in the black hats might be winning. Perhaps it is time to reach out again and touch His cloak, in prayer and charity, in the scripture and study. Christ said of the little girl in the gospel story, "Why this commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but asleep." The same might be said of the faith of many in modern times. "Why this commotion and weeping? Your faith is not dead but asleep."