

**“AIN’T NOTHING LIKE THE REAL THING, BABY”**

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I recently heard the restaurant chain Panda Express plans to expand into China. As I heard it, I thought, wow, that could be a hard sell. Think of it—selling American Chinese food to those who originated that cooking. Food writer Jennifer Lee told NPR, “The Chinese food we eat in America is very alien to Chinese people.”

Sometimes we believe that something is authentic. But are we really so sure? And how do we know when something truly is authentic? Yes, we can list our reasons and adduce our evidence. But it is in part intuitive. That is, when we’re in the presence of something real--the genuine article--a light goes on inside of us.

Take our gospel story, for example. Jesus, Peter, James, and John descended a mountaintop to find the scribes baiting the other disciples in a religious argument. Bad sign. If our faith is about God’s all-conquering love in Christ, how can that be conveyed in something so self-interested or self-serving as a religious argument?

Fortunately, awed at Jesus’ presence, they abandoned their little quarrel and rushed to him. Jesus was curious. He asked what their ruckus was all about. His disciples were too embarrassed to own up to it. Instead a father piped up and told Jesus of his epileptic son’s torment. He’d asked the disciples to heal his boy, but they couldn’t. And that had seemingly led to dissension among various sides.

Bad sign. A hurting father, whose child is not only suffering, but near death more than once, comes for healing and hope. And they give him a religious argument. Just wonderful. As the dad brings the boy to Jesus, almost on cue, he goes into convulsions. He asks Jesus to heal him, if he’s able. “If I am able?” Jesus clears his throat. “All things can be done with one who believes.” Jesus then heals him.

But don’t let that major miracle hide the minor miracles. Amid their sparring—religious arguments are the worst—that dad blurted out his spontaneous prayer. Amid two sides attacking each other over who had the most faith, who had the real faith, who had the legitimate religion, that father exclaimed, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” Agonized by his beloved son’s suffering, his prayer was part hope, part desperation. The dad is so torn up, he goes for it, risking the whole truth.

Are you good at being vulnerable as those around you prowl and attack? I’m not. “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief,” is likely the most honest and authentic prayer I have ever heard. Who among us can’t identify with both in that internal struggle?

One more thing. The only reason the father found the courage to be so straightforward was because he trusted in Jesus’ authenticity as the way, truth and life. As we are with those who are genuine, we approach, we trust them, we open up.

Why preach on authenticity on Welcome Back Sunday? When we asked our new members why they gravitated here, we kept hearing this theme, in various forms. They said as you welcomed them, you really meant it. They said walking through the door they detected Christ in our midst and at our center more than other quarrelsome, divisive agendas dragging churches down in the name of religion.

They sensed our desire to act upon and live the love that we profess, not that we always succeed. They hoped to have found a true spiritual home where their own gifts might be offered up for the glory of God and the fulfillment of their destiny. Visitors can sense contentment as well as a desire to become something better.

Maybe you've heard the old joke, sincerity is the key thing. If you can fake that, you have it made. I say that because the new members also commented on our sense of humor. And how when people take themselves less seriously and God more seriously, it becomes more about how to become good than appear good.

People yearn for a church that accepts us where we are along our journey—like Jesus accepting the father of the epileptic boy—but doesn't leave us alone there; a place where none of us is perfect but together we are guided by the Holy Spirit.

I am talking about spiritual authenticity, friends. I am talking about a spiritual home that helps us live faithfully in Darien without becoming too much of Darien. What I mean is that we have been led to settle and dwell here in Fairfield County, but we don't want our daughters to feel worthless if they aren't stick thin or our sons to feel subpar for not getting all A's and also captaining the lacrosse team. We prefer the content of the character or deeds over the size of the McMansion.

Probably the thing I cherish most that was ever said about my ministry was after the first confirmation class I led in Ridgefield, CT some dozen years ago. As an ice breaker, as a way to let the confirmands know I wanted to engage the issues that truly matter in their lives, I asked for their questions about anything on a 3X5 card. Then I would spontaneously answer, totally unrehearsed. Except they didn't sign their question, so the youth were truly freed up to ask about *anything*. I wasn't polished and smooth as I stumbled among some very pointed questions. But as a dad drove down the road the next day, asking his son how it went with the pastor in class, his boy said, "You know, he really seems to believe this stuff."

Similarly, it pleases me the loftiest praise we might hope to hear about FCC is not that we're the biggest church, not that we're the most fashionable church, not that we can raise millions at the drop of a hat, not that we're the be-all and end-all. But that were the real thing, the genuine article, where God does good work.

I welcome you back to that church. That is the church we wish to remain always, true to God, true to ourselves. That's the gift we're given as a bevy of new friends allow us to walk alongside them as they are shaped and formed. Welcome back! No few struggles have brought us to this point, but the best is yet to come. Amen.