

Sometimes kids have a way of giving us a lot of wisdom because through their eyes and hearts, we can be reminded of some of the important truths about humanity and the way things are supposed to be.

Teaching in an inner city school, Mary Eastham for years taught second grade. And she would often be faced with the task of answering questions that really have nothing to do with the course of study for the day - questions you won't find on any national standardized tests. Some of these questions could be recycled into research for the class, such as "Mrs. Eastham, why are butterflies all different colors? Or, "Mrs. Eastham, how does the grass die in the winter and then come alive in the spring?" Others are much more ponderous and may not have an exact right or wrong answer.

Since she was not one to squelch curiosity, she and her class would often take these opportunities as they arose and have short class discussions on them. She let everyone comment on the subject and then tell them they can make up their own minds to the questions that came up.

Their discussions on differences started innocently enough. She asked the class if they could tell her whether a very tall man was good or bad. They agreed that you couldn't tell if someone was good or bad just because they were tall. Mrs. Eastham told the class that she knew someone couldn't walk well and so she rode in a wheelchair most of the time. Mrs. Eastham asked if that person was bad or mean because she uses a wheelchair, and they all agreed that you couldn't tell. They went on for a while in this vein and came to the conclusion that being different doesn't make someone good or bad, it just makes that person different.

Mrs. Eastham decided to take the discussion to a more personal level and explore their personal differences. They talked about how we are all different from one another, how no two people are exactly alike, how even twins have different personalities or features that define them as individuals. Mrs. Eastham went on to tell the kids that she was different from everyone in the room because she was the tallest. She was also different because she lived in the town of Red Oak and everyone else lived in Dallas.

Mrs. Eastham then planned to have each of the children tell the class how they were different. But before she could call on the first pupil, her quietest student raised his hand and announced “Mrs. Eastham is different because she is a different color.”

As she thought back on this many years later, she realized that if this had been said in a room with fifteen other adults, this simple statement of truth would have laid out on the floor, floundering like a fish out of water, while embarrassed glances waited for someone to break the awkward silence. Not so though in a classroom of 15 second graders. They jumped on it.

“Yeah, Mrs. Eastham is white.”

“No, she’s not, she’s peach!”

“I think she’s really just right brown.”

“She’s creamy.”

“She’s kinda yellow.”

“She’s just really shiny.”

Trying to hide her grin, she told the class they could have small group discussions on it while she turned the attendance report into the office. She barely made it out of the room before her smirk turned into a full belly laugh. She chuckled all the way to the office and related the story to a fellow teacher while there. She couldn’t wait to get back to the room to hear them discuss this.

When she opened the door, they were already back in their seats. They had finished their discussion. Mrs. Eastham picked a spokesperson for the group, that she would tell them if they were right or not. Then the little boy told her that the class had decided that Mrs. Eastham was clear.

Clear, she wondered. Somehow she was able to suppress her laughter. How did they come up with that she wondered. She was saved by the bell as it was time for them to go to gym. She told them they could talk about it after gym and sent them on their way. Looking back now, she knew someone was looking out for her.

While grading papers, she began to muse over their morning again. She was reminded of the times she had been at conferences and workshops and even dinner parties and had been asked, “How many of your students are black? How many white children are in your class? Do you teach many Hispanics?” So many times she has had to stop and try to count out the answers. “How many black students do I have? I know I have 15 kids. Is it 10 black and 5 Hispanic or eleven and four?” she’d have to ask.

The person posing the question would very often be amazed and perplexed that she doesn’t know the ethnic make up of her classroom. She guesses its because when she is teaching, she is teaching children, not colors. Mrs. Eastham began to realize that it was the same for her kids. They don’t see her as black or white or Hispanic; they see her as a person, someone who cares about them, encourages them to do their best and works hard with them every day.

When her students got back to the room, they were still abuzz about their morning discussion and begged her to tell them if they were right or wrong. And she had to tell them they were exactly right, she is in fact, clear.

And so now when she is asked that inevitable question at dinner parties or conventions or workshops - "How many black and Hispanic and white children do you have?" - Mrs. Eastham has a pat answer that works every time, with no fumbling or counting. She looks at the person straight in the eye and says, "None. They are all clear."

For Mrs. Eastham, all that matters to her is helping the kids she's taught find their potential and learn about themselves, the world, and how to grow as people. There is no precondition to her love; she cares for all of her students. And for those kids, in their honesty they also didn't see the differences so much as a teacher that they loved. I suppose you could say they saw clearly.

As we all know though sin's effects have a way of messing things up. In Genesis, we see the disunity between people; Adam blames Eve for his sin; Cain kills Abel, and before long you have disunity everywhere. Even unity, where the people build a tower to the heavens symbolizing how they try to challenge God and a kind of oppressive, domineering unity, gets misunderstood which is why God scatters the people at Babel. We get a

little older and we can go from the situation in Mrs. Eastham's class to focusing so much on differences and sadly tearing one another down.

At the same time though, while unity matters, so too does diversity. Of course Mrs. Eastham wasn't clear. But she was unique; and all of her kids were unique too. A wise teacher and parent knows that two children aren't the same; they think and learn differently; they have different likes and dislikes. The question then is how do we focus on what unites us, while at the same time embracing what makes us unique and different? And this is where the Holy Spirit can be so incredibly helpful.

As we come to the feast of Pentecost, we hear in the first reading from Acts how the apostles who speak in different languages, and of how the people hear different languages. Jerusalem at the time is filled with pilgrims who have come to celebrate the great festival of Pentecost (a Jewish festival celebrated 50 days after the feast of First Fruits where farmers gave crops to the priest) in the holy city. They have traveled from places surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. As such many different languages fill the streets of the city. Yet the word of God reaches everyone in his or her native tongue. At Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), language was used to influence people to find

security in a defense erected with bricks and mortar; a prudent thing to do, but the people had forgotten about God giving them security. For this reason God confused language to limit such misguided thinking. But now no limitation is needed because the Gospel is a blessing, leading people to find security in God.

And so as a starting point, we recall how the Spirit is given to all of us, as is God's love. God's love is freely given and it's meant to unite us as people. As Saint John Paul II stressed, because we are created in God's image, the proper response we give to one another is to love one another. As we all know some people can be hard to love. But when we start there and see the human person first, much like those kids in a sense just saw a teacher they loved not so much her skin color, it can do so much. This love which unifies us as being given to us all, is something we can also pass on. We can see to the heart and realize that no one is born angry, a cruel person, or selfish. We can become more patient and try to will their good. It takes many forms from being patient on the road, kind to a telemarketer who calls us on our phone, tolerant with people who are different from us politically, having a willingness to engage in discussions like Mrs. Eastham did with

her kids to help others to learn the truth of what God's love looks like, and also respecting the differences others have with us.

And that leads to the second point: we are united, but different. There is unity in the apostles receiving the Holy Spirit, but each speaks in a unique language too. The other day I shared a favorite children's story at Mass called "The Day the Crayons Quit," which tells the story of a group of crayons who went on strike each with various grievances to Duncan who owned the crayons; pink being angry at not being used enough as she was deemed a girls color; blue for being overused; yellow and orange arguing over who should be used to color the sun properly; beige being depressed about being seen as a boring color and red being perturbed about working holidays having to of course draw Santa Clause. At the end of the story each crayon is used for a beautiful picture Duncan paints for his class. Such is how we are to use the colors God gives us if you will. Sometimes we focus so much on what we don't have, but not what we do have. It is important to celebrate diversity in all its forms; from our cultural background, but also to what makes us unique. From preferring the Vikings or Packers to how we vote to the unique gifts we are given that lead us to different vocations. I think of just in the parish how we have so many

people who do different things from maintenance to religious ed to accounting to the scores of volunteers who make our liturgies possible to putting on the festival and events during the year to serving a lunch for people at funerals. As Covid wanes all of these ministries will be finally ramping up again and we'll be looking to people to help. Diversity matters so much, so it's important to think about how to use our gifts for God's glory. Listen to the voice of God; what is He calling you to do? Discern your gifts and put them into practice. Believe in yourself too - know that we fall many times on the way as we try to use these gifts, but the Holy Spirit is there to help us how to excel in our vocations.

Lastly, through it all, it all goes back to working together for the greater good. Unity gets out of control when we become tribal; or thinking people who are different than us are worse or not loved by God and have to be eliminated; diversity gets out of control when it becomes all about us and we think our talents and mindset is the only way leading to an unchecked ego. And this is where God's gift of the conscience helps so much. We need to be introspective and ask ourselves questions in terms of how we are doing. With unity, we might dislike people - and some people are annoying or irritating. We might have strong opinions on politics or the

economy or parenting or even Covid and that is fine. But we have to be honest with thinking about where we fail in terms of seeing God in people. Do we practice tolerance or just talk about it? Do we try to be patient? Do we abuse the body in terms of how we view the body of other people? Is there racism in our heart? And with respect to diversity, do we embrace our gifts but does it go too far in terms of our ego; are we being a good parent recognizing our kids are unique and different from us and also their siblings and have to find their way in the world or are you being overbearing? Are you willing to see the gifts others have and ask for help? Are you willing to say maybe someone else can do this better than I can? Are you willing to listen rather than correct or talk over others? Are you willing to learn from others? How do we look at people who have different views on politics or how to do something in our parish or community?

As we are all aware, there is no escaping division in the world, and we live in such a polarizing time. I'll always be me and have my likes and dislikes. And I also believe in certain undeniable truths about faith and morals which I try to convey to people and help them on their own faith journey. But while all those kids saw a little something different in their teacher, each one of them loved her and she loved them in return, which is truly the way things

are meant to be as we as people build one another up. Indeed, you can't tell if a person is good or bad by looking at the outside, and only God sees to the heart; Mrs. Eastham didn't see colors, she saw kids, and God looks at you and me and sees not colors, politics, ideologies, good or bad people, just simply people he loved because He wills our good. Let us strive to do that rather than tear one another down, recognizing that we are truly many parts but all one Body of Christ.