

In the Broad Street Market in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania you'll find among the vendors several Amish families selling meat. One of them is an older man who lives close to where I grew up, and his sales practices are quite interesting. He has many regular customers who often praise him for the quality of his meat and the cuts he provides. If he doesn't have what you want he'll have it cut for you. He tells customers, "I'll have my guys cut it for you and have it ready next time."

The interesting thing is who his "guys" are. His guys are not, as people assume, his younger sons. No, his "guys" are the men who work at the local commercial butcher shop in the nearby town of Elizabethville. What this Amish man is, is very simply a meat retailer. But people assume, and he doesn't bother to correct their inaccurate assumption, is that he is the head of an Amish family run farm and he is selling the meat that he and his family have raised by their own labor. No, in fact it is the exact same meat you'd buy in a grocery store. People are just willing to pay more because it comes from an Amish person.

As soon as you see an Amish or Mennonite person your brain may conjure up a whole image of a way of life. That image may or may not be accurate.

I think the church is facing something similar these days. Say the word "church" and many people immediately have an image come to mind. That image varies a lot from person to person, and probably depends significantly on the person's age. Older people generally think of a structured and serene time for worship. Church conjures up images of singing and organ music, preaching, prayer and maybe Communion. Younger people more often than not get an image that is stuffy, irrelevant or outright hypocritical.

This image challenge is one of the major obstacles the church is facing these days. Yes, the church is a lot of things. Images of traditional worship are not at all wrong or bad, but there is so much more. How do you market yourself when many people immediately get a negative image of you? That will be an ongoing challenge for decades to come in the church.

Jesus was facing an image problem too. In our gospel reading we find those who knew him as a kid having a hard time with him as an adult. When Jesus gives this grand teaching that we call the Bread of Life Discourse their response is, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

They hear "Jesus of Nazareth" and immediately an image comes to mind. That image may not be wrong. I'm sure their memories of Jesus as a child were perfectly good. But their images weren't big enough. Jesus was so much more than they knew. They now have to expand their understanding of him, -and they have to expand their understanding of their faith, -and they have to expand their understanding of God too. A lot is getting stretched here.

The Jews had a pretty orderly understanding of who God is and how God operated. They thought they knew what God wanted and how God acted. Their ideas about all of this were right - for the most part- they just weren't big enough.

I've altered the verses for our gospel reading today. The Revised Common Lectionary which selects what Bible readings we have when omits verses 36-40 of John chapter 6. I've added these verses back in because they include a very big and important understanding about God - one that may stretch our understanding of God quite a bit.

In verse 37 Jesus says, "...anyone who comes to me I will never drive away." I find it very nourishing and comforting to consider God as never driving me away. All too often I come across messages from Christians which would suggest that if I don't do things right God will abandon me. Life then becomes doing it right for God.

Jesus' teaching here is the reverse. God will not let go. God will hold fast. If I wander or stray God will still find me. Jesus says, "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day."

God's desire is to draw all people and all things to himself. God's desire is to bring about eternal life for you.

This is amazing news, although it is also something we should know well. The challenge comes when we go back to the Jews limited ideas of who Jesus is. We may think that it is great that God wants to save us. But we may not be so quick to realize how this opens us.

Life as a Christian is really a *great permission* from God - not a great restriction. When people think of an Amish man they get a certain image. When the Jews thought of Jesus they got a certain image. When people think of church they get a certain image. In every case the image isn't big enough. There is so much more.

I invite you to consider your faith as something of possibilities, not restrictions. I encourage you to be open to the ever new and broader things God is up to. I invite you to see church in forms far beyond anything that you've ever experienced and ever imagined. We are wrong if our thoughts of church always involve walls, pews, and preaching - even formal

worship services on a set day of the week. Worship takes many many forms. Church takes many many forms.

And not just church - all our ideas of faith. Why is it that when we see a picture of a monk praying we think reverence. But we cannot imagine reverence when we see a picture of a surfer riding a wave? Is not the wave God's good creation too?

Don't be surprised to see faith at work in many places and by many people you never dreamed of. This is a limit the Jews couldn't get past that day when they were listening to Jesus. We don't want to be like them.

What we want to do is to be authentic. Let the love of God show truly in whatever we do. Then people of all ages will see a newer and broader image of what church means. They will see a newer and broader image of what God is up to.

And a life of faith is so much more fun when you can rejoice in what you see rather than always cracking a whip to

preserve what you might think is orthodoxy. God will take care of the church. You don't have to.

God has chosen you and he will never drive you away. Rejoice and be glad that you are safe in God's love. Feel the fullness of the freedom God has in store for those who know his love. Amen