



PRAY Gracious God, you lavish your love on us who walk and talk, live and laugh, love and dance. We thank you that we are alive, especially for... Amen.

Who FITS?

What do you think is the biggest reason some kids don't seem to fit in any group?

Fitting in depends on who you know, who your friends are.

Fitting in is about wearing the right clothes.

Nobody likes bullies.

If you say what you think and not what popular kids think, you're an outsider.

Wearing brand names is one way to be popular.

If you have a car, you fit.

Fitting in depends on belonging to a sports team.

Fitting in is about being good at something entertaining.

If you want friends, be a friend.

Fitting in is about joining in activities, talking, sharing.

Kids put other kids in categories the first time they see them.

Everyone fits. What matters is who you really are.

SPiRIT

of Freaks & FRIENDSHIP

by Bob Bartlett

Three weeks of sophomore year had gone by and settled us into the high school routine. We were heading for the lunch room when I first caught sight of Mr. Wallace. He was emptying a waste basket.

"Who's the retard?" asked Carmine.

"I don't know. I've never seen him before. He must be the new janitor," Sean replied.

"Man, what the hell happened to him?" I blurted.

"Too much high school," answered Sean.

This must be him, I thought to myself. There had been no official announcement. Just rumors about some slow guy named Mr. Wallace helping out at the school. His right hand gnarled into a claw. The hand

hung permanently in the air as if suspended by a string. His left hand fell to his side. His head was always cocked to the right, and his face appeared distorted. His crooked mouth lay forever half-opened. Each step he took demanded intense concentration. His left foot simply did not work. He dragged it along the floor as he came down with a robot-like jolt on his right foot. He always seemed ready to fall but he never did.

"That's the last time I complain about zits," Carmine snorted.

"No kidding," I responded. "Let's go eat."



The next day, we were huddling in the hall, enjoying some comic relief before the agony of trigonometry, when we saw Mr. Wallace. I watched him exit the office and lurch towards us. I made the mistake of looking up just long enough to allow his eyes to meet mine. It was too late. I prayed that he would not touch me, but he put his hand on my forearm. I hoped he was not contagious. Every muscle in his face strained as he slowly forced words out of his mouth.

“C-o-u-l-d y-o-u t-e-l-l m-e w-h-e-r-e t-h-e b-a-t-h-r-o-o-m i-s?” I noticed a trace of spit weave around the side of his mouth and form into a tiny drool.

Sean whispered, “Don’t tell him. We’ll never be able to use it after he’s done.”

“He’s probably just going to clean in there,” I heard Carmine mumble.

I felt like a Chinese policeman giving directions to an American tourist.

“M-r. W-a-l-l-a-c-e, t-h-e b-a-t-h-r-o-o-m i-s r-i-g-h-t d-o-w-n t-h-i-s h-a-l-l. T-h-e MENS i-s o-n t-h-e r-i-g-h-t s-i-d-e. Y-o-u w-a-n-t m-e t-o w-a-l-k y-o-u d-o-w-n t-h-e-r-e?”

He shook his head, “N-o t-h-a-t’s o-k-a-y.” He stumbled down the hall.

“Man, he is in rough shape,” exclaimed Carmine. “Why did they hire him?”

“Hey, the guy needs a break,” Sean replied. “I think it’s great the school hired him. Give the guy a little dignity.”

Actually people at school were pretty cool to Mr. Wallace. No one ever mocked him to his face, and when he drooled, most of us just looked the other way. I’m sure some other schools would have been unmerciful to him.



In communications class two weeks after the infamous bathroom incident, Mr. Howlin walked into the room and placed his books on the desk. He began pacing the aisles.

“I just want to commend you sophomores for the way you treat Mr. Wallace. All of you are so nice and polite to him.”

Hey, why not, I thought to myself. *No reason to make it harder on the guy.*

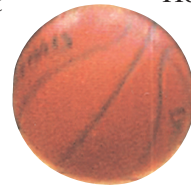
Howlin continued, “In fact, you are so kind and courteous to Mr. Wallace that you treat him different from how you treat anybody else.”

Our forty heads raised in unison. All of us were thinking as I was, *He is different. He’s retarded.* Then Mr. Howlin asked the question that would forever change the way I viewed the world.

“How many of you think Mr. Wallace is retarded?”

My heart sank. I knew he wasn’t asking because the answer was yes. He went on.

“Mr. Wallace is not mentally handicapped. He has cerebral palsy. It’s a disease that affects his brain and his spinal cord. The man has an IQ of 130. He is a master’s candidate at Lewis University. He speaks three



languages. And when you t-a-l-k li-k-e t-h-i-s you are insulting him. He drools sometimes. He can’t help it. He has almost no feeling in his mouth. Ever have a shot of novocaine? You can’t feel whether you’re drooling or not. Neither can he. If he is drooling, don’t stand there and be grossed out—tell him. He has a handkerchief in his pocket, and he will wipe it off. He is an interesting man if some of you would take the time to get to know him.”

I felt terrible. I had talked to him like he was some moron. I felt moved to get to know him.

A couple of days after the lecture we were stampeding to lunch when we spied Mr. Wallace navigating his way to the cafeteria. Instead of swerving to avoid him, we slowed down to ask him how the day was going.

Conversation was awkward. No one knew what to say. Finally, he asked us about our weekends. There were a couple of weak replies until Sean recounted some party and something about somebody being drunk.

Mr. Wallace interrupted, “You guys will know if I ever come to work drunk.”

We stared. “What do you mean?”

“I always walk a straight line when I’m really drunk. I really cruise.”

I stared in disbelief. Here was someone many would consider a freak, and he could laugh at himself.

He knew how people looked at him, and he could laugh at himself. For me, a sophomore who hated my nickname “Monk” and who was often overly self-conscious, this was incredible.

That Mr. Wallace had become a friend became apparent at one of our varsity basketball games. He kept stats for the team. He loved sports, primarily because he had never been able to play. At games he sat behind the team in the third row of

SUNDAY GOSPEL

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Faith & gratitude are miracles.

NARRATOR: On his journey to Jerusalem Jesus went through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers met him. They stood far off, raised their voices, and spoke to him.

LEPERS: Jesus, master, have compassion on us.

NARRATOR: Jesus saw them.

JESUS: Go and show yourselves to the priests.

NARRATOR: On their way they found they were cleansed. One of them, seeing that he had been

healed, turned back, praising God in a loud voice. He fell at Jesus' feet, thanking him. This man was a Samaritan.

JESUS: Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Did none return to give glory to God but this man who is not of our country?

NARRATOR: Then Jesus spoke to the man.

JESUS: Arise and go. Your faith has healed you.



Luke 17.11-19

the bleachers—usually alone because he was so busy keeping score that he never talked.

In the game I remember, we were down by 25 with a couple of minutes to go before the half. Most of the starters for the other team were already languishing on the bench, while the second squad took a turn at running over us.

Some of the starters got bored and started turning around and staring at Mr. Wallace. They'd stare and then turn back, holding their heads down to hide their laughter. Then they jutted their jaws to the side, holding their mouths open and extending their hands in the air in a claw-like imitation. I heard them talking.

"Hey, Ross, take a look at the guy behind their bench."

"Yeah, what happened to him? He looks like he escaped from some home."

"Must be the team mascot for the retards here."

They continued until halftime pulled the curtain on their show. We were heading for the locker room when Sean and Carmine sidled up to me.

"Monk, you see them making fun of Mr. Wallace?"

"Yeah, I did. I wanted to put a wall through number 15's face."

"Great," Sean said, "follow me. We need to pay them a little visit."

Sean went straight for the opposing team's locker room. He walked through the door and right toward the team huddled around their coach. Suddenly a large hand wrapped around his bicep.



"You're in the wrong locker room, boys," said the assistant coach, glaring. He pointed to the door. "Your room is down the hall." He began to escort us out, but he momentarily relaxed his grip and Sean whirled back into the locker room again. I followed.

"If you want to mock us or have some fun with us," Sean said loudly, "no problem. But back off from Mr. Wallace."

Our voices froze the assistant and the team in their places.

"He understands that you are making fun of him," Sean continued. "He's not retarded. He has cerebral palsy. Just leave him alone."

We turned and left before they recovered. We rejoined our own team's halftime huddle in the locker room down the hall. We lost the game but found out Mr. Wallace had won our friendship.

Mr. Wallace was gone after sophomore year; again there were no announcements. He had completed his curriculum project at our school and gone back to finish his masters. I never saw him again.



QUESTIONS

1 When have you experienced outsiders becoming insiders, supposed freaks becoming friends? 2 What makes people fit or not fit in your school? 3 What is Jesus' attitude toward outsiders like lepers? 4 Who are you most like the nine or the one?

Prayer is responding to God's love.

Praying is about more than memorizing the words other people pray; it is about finding one's own words for being in relationship with God. Other people's words can help us find our own. The bible has 150 prayers called psalms.

Jesus teaches us the Our Father as an example of words to pray and live. Jesus addresses God very personally and affectionately the same way we talk to our fathers, calling them Dad or Papa and recognizing parents know and care for us.

We still have our own relationship with God. Praying is a way to keep up friendship with God—to text once in a while, to let God in on excitement I'm feeling or worries that won't go away.

Praying comes from the heart, from our whole selves. In the bible the heart is the inner dwelling place where I am and where I consciously live. The heart stands for the self, the conscious I. The heart is the center deep within where I make decisions and commit to relationships.

In praying we respond to the mystery of God's love in which we live. God blesses us with life and personal gifts—the ability to sing, sprint, do math, hope, speak, dance, laugh. God blesses us with creation, the evolving cosmos of which we are the future—God's co-creators.

We bless God for blessing us. In prayers of blessing we recognize the giver of our lives.

Besides blessing God, we can bless one another. We can recognize and affirm each others' gifts. A classmate plays a melody



on the violin that opens my mind to hope. A classmate inspires and organizes a food drive for a local food pantry.

Praying is persistent attention to the mystery in which we live—the diversity of plants, animals, and people; the complexity of the conscious brain and world cultures; the oneness from which all comes. Our world can enchant us. All that we learn can lead to wonder and awe at the Holy Mystery that is God.

Beside blessing, Sunday's gospel identifies two other kinds of prayer—petition and thanksgiving. Ten lepers cry out to Jesus as he passes by, pleading to be healed. Their prayer of petition identifies their deep need for healing and return to their families. Jesus responds because they ask, sending them to the temple priests who find them whole.

The prayer of blessing is our human response to God's gifts: because God blesses, the human heart can in return bless the One who is the source of every blessing.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #2626

Only one of the ten returns to thank Jesus. Ironically the one grateful person is a Samaritan, a heretic and outsider most Jews would look down on. We recognize ourselves in the story. Too often we take the gift of life and the wonder of creation for granted. We are forgetful with the nine, rather than thankful to God with the one.

Saying thank you is important in friendship and important to our relationship with God from whom we creatures have our lives. A thank-you for a meal or for a tutoring session or for a ride is a way to remember and recognize the gift. In prayers of thanksgiving we remember the gifts God gives us in ourselves and the abundance of creation. When we ask God to help someone other than ourselves, our petitions become prayers of intercession.

FAITH in ACTION

- 1 Listen to what God may be saying to you in your heart by taking a quiet time alone or a solitary walk.
- 2 Write a prayer of petition that expresses a serious personal need. Pray the prayer often. How does the prayer help you?
- 3 Choose a time of day or place to thank God each day for the delights and challenges of being alive.
- 4 Bless a person who doesn't fit in easily with a hello that recognizes he or she exists.

By prayer of petition we express awareness of our relationship with God. We are creatures who are not our own beginning, not the masters of adversity, not our own last end.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #2629, 2634, 2637, 2639, 2644