Christoph Keller, III

Trinity Cathedral

October 13, 2022

**Samuel Harris Piazza**

Five years ago this month, Sam asked that I write a letter recommending him to colleges. This was through the Common Application, so it went out to any school that he applied to.

October 3, 2017

To Whom it May Concern:

I have known Sam Piazza for just under four years, which is the time I have served as the dean of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Little Rock. As his dean, I know Sam as a quiet, intelligent, and faithful young man who is respected and liked by his peers and admired by his elders. He has the set of qualities and skills, including in athletics, that win friends and influence people in his age group—and to those he adds gentleness and kindness, including to those who are less gifted and popular than he. An unusual thing about Sam is that he also adds a strong artistic sense and bent to his repertoire. There are lots of athletes, and it may be lots of artists too, in high school, and not as many who show interest and aptitude in both. Sam does.

I also know Sam in another way: through my involvement with a summer theological debate program at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. Bright students from across the country gather for a week to take part in rather intense, college level lectures in systematic theology and classical reasoning, and in seminars with professors from the university. At week’s end, students debate a resolution in a tournament. Sam signed up for the camp precisely because he is quiet, a strong silent type, and he had decided it would do him well both to explore tough questions and to have to publicly express himself and defend his ideas. He did very well on both counts.

I heartily recommend Sam as a young man of excellent character and great promise.

Very truly yours,

Etc.

As it turned out, Sam and Sewanee chose each other, as I had hoped they might.

I like those old philosophic terms “potential” and “actual.” Potential is what might take place. Actual is what does, or has. Babies, for example, are almost pure potential. Then day by day as they grow up, actuality takes hold.

Sam was born twenty-three years ago next month: November 15, 1999, at 3:15 a.m., apparently with most of Hamburg, Melody’s hometown, outside in the waiting room. At birth he fussed, like every other newborn, while his mother hugged and cleaned him up, and the nurse and obstetrician did their thing. Then his father, in an attempt to soothe him, said his name. Melody chimed in. These were voices Sam had heard for weeks. Immediately the crying stopped, as Sam turned his head their way. He knew his mom and dad.

His grand-mum on his dad’s side, Francis Piazza, was a Brit. She would hold Sam on her knees, with love and admiration. “Oh he’s such a bonnie lad,” she’d coo. Sam was still a wee lad when Francis died. That day, before his parents had decided when or how to tell him, he was outside with his father ––and, the Judge says, “another witness.” Suddenly, and apropos of nothing, two-year old Sam points to the sky. “Look, I see an angel.” For a few seconds his finger traced an arc, as though following a bird in flight. Then, he dropped his hand. “The angel’s gone,” he said. Remembering that day, Chris commented “I wonder if children can sometimes see things that are invisible to us.”

Sam’s favorite place to go was Florida, the beach. It was not as much that he loved sea and sand, as that this was where he spent time with his older brothers. Jason and Alex would drag him out into the waves and show him how to body surf and boogie board and be a dude. Come winter, the Piazzas, with cousin Brandon Dobbins, headed for the slopes. Unusual for southerners, Sam could handle bumps and he was scary fast downhill.

In twenty-three years of life, all of those potentials, with God knows how many more, were made actual in Sam. Not by a mile was twenty-three years enough.

“I mourn his future,” said his mother. We all do that, and also Melody’s and Chris’s future with their son; his siblings’ with their brother; Avery’s with her boyfriend; and on . . . and on. John Donne saw it: that list stretches exponentially. “Every man’s death diminishes me,” Donne lamented. Right now we feel that to our toes.

“We do not lose heart.”

“We do not lose heart.”

“We do not lose heart.”

*[We do not lose it, Sam I am.]*

Before Dr. Seuss,[[1]](#endnote-1) I was quoting St. Paul, who only saw need to say it once, in his second epistle to the Corinthians. Paul is thinking through the down and up of death and resurrection, giving the down its due then going on. “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” That is what a human being is: one person in two natures, one of which is obvious, while the other one is obviously not. “We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot,” Paul writes, as though tracing an arc across the blue. This unseen nature holds indestructible potential.

Paul continues: “We wish not to be unclothed.” He is talking now about that obvious outer nature we are so accustomed to, and he speaks for all of us: we do not want to lose that. Nor should we want to. After all, it is God who gives it to us. It is not less of life resembling this one that we hope for, it is more. I love what Paul writes next to illustrate that hope. “We wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”

In Christ, God shows that hope fulfilled. We are diminished now, but Sam is not. He is not less for having died. He is more.

Faith is not an antidote for grief. We learn that the hard way. It is because we don’t lose heart. In both our natures, grief is one of love’s potentials. We grieve Sam because that is how we’re loving him right now. I could almost say thank God for grief, sincerely, because we know the goodness in it. But hold that thought.

Now I’ve got something to say about the devil, because I’ve been reading about him lately. For the lawyers in the house, I’ll tell you how I got there. I was enjoying Larry McMurtry’s novel, Zeke and Ned, where the action moves back and forth from western Arkansas to the Indian territories, in what now is eastern Oklahoma. Ezekiel Proctor and Ned Christie were Cherokee—actual, not fictional––who fell into trouble with the law. Enter Judge Isaac Parker, the “hanging judge,” everybody calls him, which was of Isaac Parker just about the only thing I knew. Zeke, who narrates, says “I had expected to despise Judge Parker.” On meeting him, Zeke was favorably surprised.[[2]](#endnote-2) And so was I. On McMurtry’s description, Isaac Parker was a man I would have liked to know. He was a person of habit, like another judge we know and love. The author writes of Parker, “Variation was unwelcome at any time of day.” Especially, he enjoyed his morning routine, starting with a walk to work along the river at Fort Smith. When he reached the courthouse, he went in to his chambers, and sat down at his desk, from which, and now I’m quoting, “the Judge invariably took a small tumbler of whiskey, to limber his brain. Then he read a few lines of Milton, from a small volume of poetry he kept in a drawer with his six shooter.”[[3]](#endnote-3) (This makes me wonder what Judge Piazza kept in his desk drawer.) But Milton? I’d never made it that far down our family bookshelf. Now I was curious. I picked up Milton’s collected poems and started to read, just to see what our hanging judge, so-called, was thinking. And that’s what led me to the devil.

I am bringing you there now, because something I found in Milton colors in a piece of our distress today, which is the part in grief that love alone does not explain. Early in Paradise Lost, we find Satan flat on his back, defeated and cast down from heaven. Satan’s mood seems similar to the current Russian president’s and, like him, Old Scratch is contemplating possibilities and tactics. He knows now that his grand design is futile, because his Almighty foe has shown a creative ingenuity to make even evil moments and intentions finally serve the purposes of good. But that gives Satan an idea. Listen to it.

To do aught good will never be our task,

But ever to do ill our sole delight,

As being the contrary to his high will

Whom we resist. If then [God’s] Providence

Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,

Our labour must be to pervert that end,

And out of good still to find means of evil,

Which oft-times may succeed, so as perhaps

Shall grieve him, if I fail not, and disturb

His inmost counsels from their destined aim.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Milton’s devil puts his finger on an insight at least as ancient as the Bible. Evil follows good as though it were its shadow, always ready to exploit an opportunity. Paul noticed this in his own nature, finding that “When I want to good, evil lies close at hand.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Thomas Aquinas, who thought hard on the subject, found that, in every instance, evil is some loss, misuse, or corruption of a good. That means that evil can make mischief almost anywhere––and sometimes mischief turns to havoc.

Our tears today are consequences of that awful process. This is the part in grief we won’t thank God for, because God doesn't want our thanks for something God did not intend. The opposite is true. Just as Milton’s Satan hoped, Almighty God, “in his inmost counsel,” now finds himself disturbed, by this frustration of his aim for Sam. I thank Judge Parker for this insight: Sam’s death is also felt in heaven. The Good Lord takes a pew and joins us in our grief this morning.

“I am the Good Shepherd.”

Jesus says this, as though to tell his audience “Remember the 23rd Psalm? That’s me.” When the wolf arrives, he warns, speaking of our problem, hired protectors cut and run. We are in John’s gospel, where the action is moving here and there around Jerusalem, building to the climax. At the moment of truth, Christ stands before the wolf and holds his ground. Horribly, the wolf prevails. That was Friday. Saturday is black. And then, the miracle. From death our shepherd rises Easter morning, “swallowed up by life.” Lo: the Devil’s doom is sure.

And so:

“If I say ‘surely the darkness will cover me and the light around me turn to night . . .”

Then I am mistaken, and will be more than favorably surprised, because:

“Darkness is not dark to you [O God];

The night is as bright as day.”

“For you yourself created my inmost parts;”

[Meaning both our natures, visible and not.]

“You knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

Which takes us back to November 1999, just before that caravan from Hamburg started up the road to Little Rock, emptying the town. Sam, from the warmth and safety of his mother’s womb, has come to recognize his parents by their voices. From that marvelous moment there is no reversal. From the beginning, human life moves invisibly on through ups, downs, twists, and turns towards more, not less. In the love of God, Sam now rises from the tomb with Christ, in light, to thrive forever.

1. The thought of whose *Green Eggs and Ham* occurred to me spontaneously, mid-homily. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, Zeke and Ned (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks:1997) Kindle edition, 376. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Zeke and Ned, 193. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Milton, Paradise Lost, *John Milton: The Complete Poems*, edited by John Leonard(London: Penguin Books, 1998) Kindle edition, p. 124 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Romans 7:21. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)