

## NICOLE AND SARAH DOBSON FUNERAL MASS

December 11, 2009

(Wisdom 3: 1-6, 9; Revelation 7: 9-10, 15-17; Mark 10: 13-16)

### YES, JESUS LOVES ME

Brothers and sisters, there's an old Christian song that goes like this: Jesus loves me! This I know,/ for the Bible tells me so./ Little ones to him belong; /they are weak, but he is strong.// Jesus loves me! This I know,/ as he loved so long ago,/ taking children on his knee,/ saying, "Let them come to me."

This hymn, "Jesus loves me" is # 191 in the United Methodist Hymnal. A woman named Anna B Warner published the lyrics in 1860 in a novel called *Say and Seal*. From the beginning, this hymn has struck a chord with Christians, especially children and the childlike, because of its simplicity. Indeed it is disarmingly beautiful because it so briefly describes the Biblical truth that God is love and that Jesus proves God is love. I thought of this hymn because its author obviously had today's Gospel (from Mark) in mind in that second verse where she talks about Jesus having kids on his knee. It is a beautiful image – Jesus spending time with children. Many artists have painted this scene and Jesus' passion for children has inspired countless acts of love on the part of his disciples – especially toward God's little ones.

Nicole and Sarah are among God's little ones; that is for sure. They intuitively understood what it means to follow Jesus. They gained this understanding from their Mom and from practicing their faith under Joyce's guidance. They knew about Jesus from loyally coming to Mass and celebrating with our parish family. In listening to God's word and receiving Jesus in Holy Communion, they learned what it means to be like him. Then they lived their faith. I have heard quite a few stories this week about how Nicole and Sarah were so sensitive to their friends and to others beyond their circle of friends. They reached out in a true Christian manner. Both sisters were empathetic to an unusually high degree. Nicole took kids under her wing; "she was always there for me," one young lady said. Sarah stuck up for other kids – those who were perhaps left out or not given much attention or who had been wronged. Nicole and Sarah both loved animals and would try to protect them from harm – whether baby newborn rabbits in the back yard or their dogs and other pets or the horses they were thrilled to ride (or even snakes). In loving nature, Sarah and Nicole showed their appreciation of God's creation. Their attachment to their stuffed animals showed how sweet and warm these girls were, symbolizing how they treated other people; these sisters always treated others with great care. Through their artwork they both expressed the compassion and beauty in their hearts. Sarah wrote songs and prayers to her friends to express her love and concern.

Certainly these girls were mature in their Christian faith far beyond their years. As the Gospel today reminds us, it is to just such as these little ones that the kingdom of God belongs. Furthermore, St. Mark tells us that everyone who wants to enter the kingdom of God is called to accept it as children do. Sarah and Nicole put us adults to shame because we have learned all too well how to be petty and how to hold a grudge and how to connive, deceive, and to inflict harm.

Sadly, Sarah and Nicole were tested in this life in ways that no child should have to be and in ways that God had nothing to do with. The first reading from the Book of Wisdom assures us, however, that these sisters have proved to be golden in their behavior and in their response to evil. And we firmly believe, as this reading says, that these girls are now in the hand of God and he has taken them to himself where they will abide with him in love forever. The beautiful second reading (from the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible) presents us with a vision of the multitude of the saints from every culture and background praising God around the throne of the Lamb. Among these saints now are Nicole and Sarah who see God's face and who are forever sheltered from hunger or thirst or tears. They can play now with Jesus in his holy creation, as our Gospel from Mark portrays. Sarah wanted to do everything and she darned near did. Nicole wanted to save the world – and if she had had a few more years, she probably would have. By the power of Christ, they can now spend eternity praying that children everywhere will reach their full potential and that our world will come to its senses and see the road to salvation – the road and the way of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Jesus loves me!/This I know. Our faith tells us that this is true and we do believe it or at least we want to believe it. But it is sometimes hard to believe. One of the truly special examples of strong faith is Joyce Dobson herself. Joyce, you show us what it means to believe with simplicity and you humble us into begging God to increase our own faith. In the wake of this devastating loss, Christ asks us to trust that he and the Father did not want this to happen. And he asks us to trust that he is working and working to bring eternal good out of this tragedy. We have had a glimpse of this good in the past week in so many ways: from the outpouring of prayers and of love and support in words and hugs for Joyce and her family as well as for Nicole's and Sarah's friends and teachers and other loved ones, from those who have brought food and sent flowers and cards and wreathes, from the multitudes who have contributed to the Memorial Fund and who have donated services, from the lady who saw to it that Sarah was dressed in her favorite cherry red and Nicole in her favorite cobalt blue – a full-length dress with a hood so that Nicole can feel secure and can protect her sister. Above all, we see our loving God at work in a parish community and three school communities that have come together and put aside all smallness to focus on the big picture of what is really important – that is, to love one another and to hold each other real close.

But the eternal good of which I speak will come in the weeks and years and decades ahead as we who knew and loved Sarah and Nicole try, by God's grace, to be worthy of being part of their lives. The most lasting way that we can remember them is by imitating their goodness. We are challenged by their virtues to be changed people, people young and old who will always believe in the power of love and in the strength of God's grace. We are challenged by their faith to stay close to Jesus in prayer and to stay close to the church. In this Advent Season, we are challenged by the joyfulness of these sisters to bring Christ to birth again in the hearts of those who may have lost hope.

I want to speak especially to Nicole's and Sarah's friends. You have suffered an enormous loss, probably for most of you the biggest loss of your young and precious lives (and, pray God, may you never experience such a thing like this again). You have every right to be angry and to have your other strong feelings. But do not hold on to them too long. Your own happiness will arise out of the memory of your friendships with these girls. Your lives have been changed forever by this loss. But your lives will be

changed for good if you let Jesus guide you to make a difference in your families, your schools, among your friends, and before long you will be making a real difference in your communities and, yes, in the world. Be like Sarah who wanted to stick up for the wronged. Be like Nicole who wanted to change the world. Be like both of these sisters in doing little acts of kindness every day. This can happen if you let it. You have the opportunity to live lives transformed by the example of Nicole and Sarah – lives that will transform others as long as you live. Sarah and Nicole will work with God in heaven to bring about this good in you which will be your monument to these two remarkable friends.

The third verse of the song “Jesus Loves Me” goes like this: Jesus loves me still today, /walking with me on the way,/ wanting as a friend to give/ light and love to all who live. For all who were close to Nicole and Sarah in any way, it is now up to us to be Jesus in this verse of the song. Remember that we are the Body of Christ. As St. Teresa of Avila said, he has no hands or feet or heart but ours now. And so it is our vocation to walk with others as friends and to give light and love to all who live. I am confident that we will do this and that our determination to be Jesus to others will be the real legacy of these two girls. This determination will also be a source of perpetual consolation to their mother who mourns them so deeply but who also deeply desires that their goodness will live on. Jesus loves me/ This I know!/ May we show our faith in this simple truth of the Bible by giving light and love to all who live – as Nicole and Sarah did.