

TRADING PLACES? YES OR NO?

You know how every once in a while people will be asked if they could meet someone from history who would they choose? Depending—answers are all over the place from Babe Ruth, to Mozart to Leonardo da Vinci to Jesus. But here's a variation on that question. Have you ever met someone or known of someone that you would switch places with—in a heartbeat—as is? That you would become them? Thinking that you would really like being that person?

And now yet another variation. If you had to become an animal what animal would you choose to become? A Golden Retriever? A mighty lion? A dolphin?

Lastly. You are God. You have created a brave new world where you have shared some of your great love and freedom with certain creatures. They, we, misused the gift. They, we, failed to trust. They, we, did not listen. They, we, did not obey. They, we, placed themselves very far away from you, the living God. How to reach out to them, to us? How to reach them, us?

*It was Christmas Eve. Sam looked out the window of his small farm house. The snow was swirling down and covering the ground with its clean bright whiteness. He could hear the frosty north wind whistling through the cracks in the window that he had promised his wife Rosemary that he would repair. Sam was alone. Rosemary, their daughter, Elizabeth, and son, Jonathan, had left earlier to attend the midnight Christmas Eve service in their church. Sam chose not to go. He seldom went with them to church, though he knew this disappointed them.*

*"The barn!" Sam suddenly said out loud. "I forgot about the animals! I've never done that before. What in the world is wrong with me?" Sam quickly put on his boots and coat. He pressed the fur hat his wife had made for him onto his head. He opened the back door and a blast of frigid air sent a shiver through him. He carefully walked down the icy steps and across the yard to the barn. With a pull, the large wooden barn door creaked open. Sam walked inside.*

*It was almost as cold in there as outside. His breath hung in large white clouds in front of him. Sam struck a match and began lighting the two oil heaters he kept there. He stood around one, rubbing his hands together in its orange, toasty glow. Betsey the cow and Buster the mule seemed to welcome the light and warmth. Sam fed them. Soon they were full and warm, and ready for a long winter's night sleep.*

*Sam opened the barn door and walked outside. Snowflakes danced around him and he remembered when he was a boy running around in the snow trying to catch the snowflakes on his tongue. He had the crazy thought of trying it again right then but just knew old lady Crowder, his neighbor down the road, who seemed to know all they did, was even then watching at her window.*

*As Sam walked back toward the house, the snow crunching under his feet, he noticed some little sparrows perched on the bare limbs of the pear tree he had planted a few years ago. The bitter wind ruffled the feathers of the birds who seemed frozen to the limb. Other sparrows had fallen to the ground and were flopping around there. Sam knew they would soon die without shelter and food.*

*"Poor little sparrows," Sam said out loud. "If only I could help you." Sam walked slowly toward them. "I know, I'll put you in the barn," he said softly to them. "You will be safe and warm there." Sam tried to catch the birds but they were afraid of this giant creature. They would not let him get close enough to catch them. They did not understand that he was only trying to help them.*

*"If only I could become one of them," Sam thought. "If only I could become a sparrow, then I could tell them. Then I could show them what to do. I could lead them to shelter and safety."*

*Suddenly the air seemed alive with music. The bells from the church steeple were echoing through the night, announcing the arrival of Christmas. Sam felt his heart strangely warmed. He stood there watching the birds, the bells still ringing in his ears, and for the first time he began to understand Christmas. Warm tears began to flow down his cheeks and he knelt in the snow and prayed:*

*O, Lord, now I think I understand. In the Christ Child you became one of us. It was the only way. We were like cold, hungry sparrows. You became one of us to help us, to show us the way, just like I wanted to become one of the sparrows to help them. Forgive me. I did not understand. Now I will follow You into the warmth and shelter of Your barn.*

*Sam stood up and turned to look at the sparrows. He hated to leave them like this. "Christ Child, help me know what to do," he prayed. And Sam had an idea. He went into the barn and came out with a sack of seed. He threw some of the seed onto the snow, making a trail of seed leading right into the barn. Then he hid and watched.*

*Slowly, one sparrow flew to the seed and began to eat. Then another. And another. Soon all the sparrows had eaten their way right into the barn. Sam quickly shut it and peeped through a crack into the barn. The birds seemed frightened and confused at first, but soon soared to the barn rafters and perched there, full and warm. Sam smiled.*

*The people in the church were softly singing "Silent Night." Suddenly, there was a blast of cold air from the back of the church. Everyone turned and there was Sam with a look of radiant joy on his face, walking down the aisle looking for his family. He found them and gathered them in his arms and began to sing louder than everyone. He had never felt such warmth and peace.*

“Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not deem equality with God something to be grasped but rather emptied himself taking on the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men and being found in that likeness became like us in all things including death, death on the cross.”

Why? Would you do that? Trade places with another? Take on the reality of a creature less than yourself? He became like us in all things but sin. What would make the Father send his beloved to us like that? Suffer for us like that? Only one thing. Everyone here knows it. We all know the answer. There is only one reality that has the power to move us to do that.

Selfless love. Forgiving love. Redemptive love. Salvific love.

Emptying oneself of oneself. Becoming parents is the path by which most adults empty themselves and in the process become selfless and loving people. If we are not parents then there are other ways for Religious, Priests, single adults and children and young people. There are sacrifices made, loneliness endured, gifts of self about which others know nothing. There are good deeds done with no human record. There are acts of generosity of money, time, skill about which others know not one thing. There is the offering up of being passed over, misunderstood, taken for granted, etc. There are the moments when we give without counting the cost to ourselves. In those moments we become like Christ ourselves. We begin to become Him. We don't so much trade places but as Saint Paul says, "I no longer live but Christ lives—in me."

My friends, The Word took on our flesh, became a sparrow so to speak, so that we would not be afraid and so he could lead us to safety and restore our lives to us. He asks only that we believe this—and then, follow Him!