

Christmas Eve, 2009

In the course of my life, I have had many affairs... with grocery stores. I adore them. Perhaps it is a trivial fact to bring up on the Eve of the Anniversary of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But I am a glutton for grocery. I like the variances in the different stores. I love local variety. When people do not share my obsession, I blankly look at them in the same manner in which people in Texas glare at me when I say that I know nothing about football. Would you believe that in the past year, I even dated a Russian, believing that if anyone could luxuriate in a grocery store it would be someone who grew up in Communist Russia. But he was just happy that there was food and not a bread line. And that was that.

When I first moved to Westchester County, I had a brief affair with the Stop and Shop, but in Larchmont, the parking lot was full of competitive soccer moms vying for parking spots and produce. And so the love was short lived. Then, I found Mrs. Greens, aka Senora Verde's. I still enjoy that shopping experience, especially because of Phyllis, who as she checks me out, looks at me, then the person in line behind me and says as a hint to that person, "Thank you, dear, for bagging your own groceries." Sometimes, I play along, look at the person behind me, shrug and say, "Some people are so rude." If I'm in my collar, I think it's extra effective.

Of course, I did love Whole Foods. But Whole Foods is a demanding affair. She is the sort of lover who requires little blue Tiffany boxes on every occasion. There's a reason that they call it Whole Paycheck. But I tell you, my friends, of a new shopping experience. I have seen the Savior... of supermarkets! It is called Market Street, and it is near my Father's home in Dallas Texas. I realize that this betrays my normal Dallas disdain, but I have found a reason to render Dallas Delovely. It is Market Street Market.

First off, the entrances are wide and open and blast you with warmth. You feel welcomed. There are greeters and helpers aplenty. There is a sommelier and a wine shoppe. There is even a concierge, which helps you plan a meal, for free. When we organized an event for my Father and his girlfriend, helpers ensured that everything they prepared was consistent with my nephew's life-threatening allergies. And they did it with pleasure. The prices were reasonable. They had my favorite Texas Salsa, Julio's. And they insisted on bagging my groceries. "Company policy" the bagger said as I went to help. At first, I felt shame. The bagger was over 60. Phyllis would not approve. But as he led us to the car to unload our groceries, he smiled wildly and talked about loving his job. Another worker whizzed by, riding a grocery cart. He called out to us, "Thanks y'all". Our bagger said, with pride, "That's our boss. There's not a job that he refuses to do." And when we offered a tip, "We don't take those. Thank you, though."

It was all too good to believe. They had cared for every need. I stood blurry and wobbly and weak at the knees and in love. Of course my New York sensibilities cried foul. I went back several times to make sure. Could a shopping experience really be this wonderful? Could they have thought of everything? At the end of a long weekend, at 10 o'clock on a Sunday night, I went to test them. As we entered, my Father leaned in and

said, "Now we'll see for sure. Are they really this nice?" but the same help and the same courtesy were extended. Market Street is amazing.

And just in case you were wondering, I do have a point. On this Eve of the Anniversary of the Birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, my point is this: Jesus is the Market Street Market of Saviors. He is amazing and good beyond all expectations. Like Market Street, God must have done God's homework on what makes for good customer service and loyal patronage.

After all, think of the time leading up to Christmas... from God's perspective. God has created the world and made it beautiful. God has evolved us with reason and skill, not to mention opposable thumbs. But we keep getting a lot wrong. First, we miss a lot about God. We seem unable to believe that God is so good. We tend to think that when bad things happen, they are a punishment, even though it is simply part of our freedom on this earth. And we forget that God is holding our hands even through the most difficult of times. And worse, we even write stories, supposedly dictated from God, in which we struggle to find the goodness of God. Then, and secondly, we do the same thing to one another. We fail to see the good in one another. We blame one another and ourselves for the bad things that sometimes happen. We label one another as evil. And so we hurt one another and ourselves (sometimes in the name of God).

God, in such a situation, could have reached for market share in any number of ways. There's always that flood option, the redo. What god doesn't love a little wrath? But God promised that would never happen again. And it didn't solve anything anyway. God could have sent another prophet, but then again, people mostly thought that they were arrogant and unhelpful. And prophets were pretty murky about God's goodness too. Or God could have just left us behind. "There are other planets", God might say, "Let them deal with the earth themselves." But instead, God dreams up a new plan, something we never could have thought of ourselves! God somehow becomes a child, an innocent, needy, vulnerable, child. And this child is not interested in judgment or shame. He only wants to be loved. And he wants to love us, whether we are naughty or nice, good or bad, Christian, or anything else. God simply asks to be cared for and suckled. It is difficult for us to understand, even 2000 years later, what trust God is giving us in this world and how good God's love is.

Over six years ago, my Mother died. To be specific, as some of you know, my Mother killed herself. My parents had been in the middle of a separation. She could no longer see the good in life and in God. It is something that I have been unable to really preach about, let alone share, until now. As you can imagine, it has taken my family at least this long to put our lives back together and to gain some perspective.

That goes doubly for my Father. You can imagine the pain and the guilt and the questioning that we all experienced. And my Father, especially, could not believe that life could be good again. He had a hard time imagining that a romantic relationship could be fulfilling and productive. But when I was in Dallas two weeks ago, I did not only flounder around in grocery stores. I also blessed the home of my Father and his

girlfriend. My Father now has an established relationship with a woman who loves and cares for him as he loves and cares for her. And my Father has learned to trust again. Even more, he, who never cooked more than opening up a can of those doughy, refrigerator biscuits, suddenly enjoys being a househusband. He cooks and has a glass of wine ready for his paramour after work. And their home is not only blessed. It is a blessing. His home, to me, is a reminder that God is constantly inviting us to goodness and love, and that God is doing that even when we cannot imagine that God could be so wonderful.

In that sense, Jesus is God's response to our response to God, if you can follow that. When we believed that God could not be good. When we were faced with such contrary evidence and problems in the world. When many people believed that God is only interested in cursing and pain, God sent Jesus into the world as light into the darkness. God gave us the Market Street of Saviors, and said, this is who I am. This is what I am like. I am infinitely better than you could ask or imagine, I created the heavens and the earth, and I am also this weak, newborn child, helpless in every way. With Jesus, God is saying, I am in control, and I want to be with you, and I need your help in creating a good world. In other words, God is interested in a long-term customer service based relationship! It is a different sort of business model. And unlike lots of banks, God is never going out of the loving business.

And so our question on this Christmas Eve is how will we respond to God's response to our response to God (... if you can follow that)? How will we accept and participate in God's love? I hope that it is like my Father in his new home. I hope that we trust again and have faith in love and the power of good in the world. I pray that we stop seeing God as anything other than that love. And I hope that we care for the Christ in one another. Jesus Christ is the Market Street of Saviors. God is the Market Street Market of Gods. Maybe we can, with God's help, be the Market Street of believers and welcome that love into our world!

Merry Christmas. Please note, no one has been paid for this Market Street Advertisement.