Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



Isaiah and Sr. Jennifer Wilson, goofing around in a selfie (Jennifer Wilson)



by Jennifer Wilson

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Did God tell you that you could not have a kid? If God is not actually a person, how did he tell you that? If God is a person, where does he live? You love me and kids, so why would God not let you have one?

I am pretty sure the 5-year-old asking these questions didn't take a breath as the questions came rolling out. I am not a theologian. When my students in the classroom ask a question that I need to think about, or is a bit disruptive to the topic at hand, I tell them to put the questions in the parking lot and we will unpark them later.

But this kid looked at me and was waiting for the answers. I answered the questions, and I am not sure exactly what I said. He did remind me just a few days ago that God loves each person, and everyone should love God by finding what they love to do. I might have said something like that to him. He told me that he is going to love God by being a nice and kind police officer. Isaiah, who will be 6 in a few weeks, really thinks about all of this! He might have a future as a theologian.

Isaiah's questions led to a reflection about my vow of chastity. I started to look again at the answer I often give to my students and others. I usually say something like not having kids allows me to be involved with other kids and young adults in ways I would not be if I had my own kids and/or a significant other. I don't think that others can fully grasp what this looks like, and at times those words sound hollow even to

my own ears.

Just a few weeks after I made my final vows, I was spending time with cousins I do not see often. I still had this amazing feeling — that is indescribable — from saying *yes* to God and the Sisters of Mercy for the rest of my life. My cousin told me I would have made an amazing mother and expressed his concern around choosing to be a Sister of Mercy. He didn't understand why I would choose something else. In these situations, I can never quite find the right words. It is somewhat impossible to explain to someone that because of the way I have let God in to love me, I can love others.

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I wonder what would have happened if I would have quoted the Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy to my cousin. The Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy say,

> Accepting God as our first and all- encompassing love, we give ourselves in love to our companions in community, to those in need and to family and friends. These relationships enrich our lives by challenging us to grow as persons. God illumines the mystery of celibate love in contemplation, in friendship and in our life of service. In times of loneliness we depend on God to sustain us.

I am guessing his eyes would have glassed over and he would have thought that what I quoted were just words. In my reflections on what the Constitutions say about the vow of Chastity, I can see the many ways I have brought those words alive as I live out my life as a Sister of Mercy.

The pandemic of 2020 has created a lot of uncertainty. Life during it has been different for everyone. It has caused hardship and heartbreak for so many. I have experienced mild problems compared to what many are facing. Travel plans, which I am privileged and grateful to have, have been put on hold. The travel was related to my life as a Sister of Mercy and gives me the opportunity to connect with other sisters in other parts of the U.S. and the world. I miss those face-to-face connections.

However, it has allowed me the opportunity to connect more with my friends and family. It has provided more time for reflection on my vow of chastity. I do not have the responsibility of getting a family through this. I need to be responsible with

finances, but I do not have to worry about whether there will be enough money for my family to eat as food cost rise and jobs become scarce.



Jennifer Wilson, second from left, with Massa, right, a refugee student she has known for almost 20 years, and her family (Provided photo)

I have been able to be present to people in several different ways. Massa, a refugee student I have known since she was 5 years old, is now in college. This pandemic has allowed me to be present to her via Zoom, in what has added up to many hours of tutoring and helping her navigate the complicated process of financial aid, scheduling of classes, and so on. She is not my daughter, but it is a very special mentoring relationship that would not have been possible if I had my own children. I have seen the love of God in her smile, in her gratitude for the time I have spent

explaining and explaining again.

And God is present in my relationship with the inquisitive and brilliant Isaiah. He is growing and overcoming situations he experienced before being adopted. I am privileged to help him grow and witness God's hand in it. Over Facetime a few minutes ago, I talked with a 6-year-old who is scared because her mom is in the hospital.

These relationships and many more like them are what give flesh to my vow of celibacy. I am gifted with being able to connect to many different people. My mom often calls me the Pied Piper because of the way I have with children. I told Isaiah that everyone should love God by finding what they love to do. My vow of chastity makes it possible to love God and others in what is the best way possible for me — and I am grateful to have Massa, Isaiah and several other amazing kids in my life.

[Jennifer Wilson is a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Before entering the congregation, she completed two years as a Mercy Volunteer corps member in Guyana. Her graduate degree is in education and special education. She has worked with homeless women and children as a social worker and presently is a theology teacher and the diversity, inclusion and equity coordinator at Mount Mercy Academy in Buffalo, New York.]