

No More Insiders & Outsiders.

Jesus could not leave well-enough alone. In today's gospel reading, for example, he turns nearly a thousand years of religious tradition on its ear when he says to his followers,

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

Now, if you were paying attention to the first reading, from Leviticus, you'll remember that it ends with God issuing this command: ". . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself . . ." And maybe you're wondering what the difference is between what God commands in Leviticus and what Jesus commands in today's gospel, I'll tell you: The "neighbor" we are commanded to love in Leviticus were those people who were like us – those of our culture, those of our religion. But ever since Jesus redefined the term "neighbor", in his parable of the good Samaritan, to include *anyone* in need – even foreigners and strangers – we're now forced to interpret what Jesus is commanding us in today's gospel reading, as a command to love everyone, those like us and those different from us.

One of the reasons the ministry and teachings of Jesus have remained so influential, even in our modern age, is because he was always redefining membership in God's family. He never hesitated to toss out the old "entrance exams" and ignore the religious *status quo*. It was almost as if Jesus was telling us that the old ways of doing things just don't work anymore, and we need to find new ways of being the people of God.

Now, if you're like me, and seek comfort from your faith, then ideas like this can be troublesome and disconcerting, because I like to have my world well-defined. I like limits. I like boundaries. As a priest, I like to be able to clearly distinguish "orthodox" teachings from heretical ones. And simply as a human being, I like being able to know who's with us and who's against us.

But Jesus didn't seem to have this problem. No matter where he was, you could always count on him hanging out with those "other" folks. It didn't seem to matter if they were tax collectors, a prostitute, lepers, Samaritans, or even Gentiles. And the reason for all this unconventional behavior is because Jesus was the perfect embodiment of God's love. And if you have read the scriptures as I have, one of the things you'll realize is that God is a "radical lover." He loves the unlovable. He embraces the untouchable. He sees infinite value in each and every person. And because he likes to meddle in our lives, God wants us to be just like him: that is, to be extravagant, radical lovers.

So, what does radical love look like? Jesus described it pretty well, in Luke chapter six, when he said

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you (Luke 6).

In other words, radical love goes against our human nature. It leads us in directions we'd prefer not to go. It isn't concerned with personal comfort, with what "feels" right. It doesn't try to distinguish insiders from outsiders, the deserving from the undeserving, or even the worthy from the unworthy. The radical love of God leads us *into* communion with all people; that is, "walking together" with the person next to you, no matter who or what they might be. And in the community of God's radical love, there is no such thing as broken or impaired communion.

Saint Paul was a radical lover, and we just heard about an event in his life in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. And even though he was arguably the most important of the early Christian teachers and theologians – he is responsible for a majority of the books in the New Testament – Paul was also a Jew. He was raised in a culture that believed they were the chosen people of God, and the blessings of God were intended mainly for them. This is how Paul was raised. But as an adult Paul became a follower of the Risen Christ, and he believed the teachings of Jesus, that we should love each other just as God has loved us; which is to say, extravagantly, lavishly, and radically. And so Paul became one of those unique first-century Jews who believed in breaking down the walls that divide one person from another, one culture from another. And since Paul was willing to chuck the *status quo*, eventually, he who was the most ardent insider found himself labeled an outsider by his peers among the Jewish religious authorities.

A modern example of a radical lover was the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King. While he was in jail in Birmingham, Alabama, King wrote to his wife:

I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love [when he said] 'Love your enemies and pray for them that spitefully use you.' Was not [the prophet] Amos an extremist for justice [when he said] 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.' Was Paul not an extremist for the Gospel of Jesus Christ [when he said] 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ.' Was not Martin Luther an extremist [when he said] 'Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.' Was not John Bunyan an extremist [when he said] 'I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.' Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist [when he said] 'This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.' Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist [when he said] 'We hold

*these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' So the question is not **whether** we will be extremist but **what kind** of extremist will we be? Will we be extremist for hate or will we be extremist for love?*

God calls us each to be radical lovers. And he knows that this world is filled with people who are hard to love. And he knows the price we often have to pay when we do what he calls us to do; After all, he went to the cross, figuring that one out. And for us who are indeed called to be radical lovers, it's tempting to hesitate because we're afraid of what it might cost us, of what we may lose in the process. Perhaps in response to such concerns, Scott Peck wrote, in The Road Less Traveled,

When I genuinely love, I am extending myself, and when I am extending myself I am growing. The more I love, the longer I love, the larger I become. Genuine love is replenishing. The more I nurture the spiritual growth of others, the more my own spiritual growth is nurtured . . . And as I grow through love, so grows my joy, ever more present, ever more constant.

I can remember, as a young Christian, singing the song, *This is my commandment that you love one another that your joy may be full*. The challenge that Jesus sets before us in today's gospel reading, is the challenge to become radical lovers. And it's a challenge that calls us, not to give up our lives, but to give *away* our lives for the benefit of someone else. It is a call, in other words, to be, as Dr. King described it, an extremist for love; To be willing to go into those places, and be with those people, we'd rather avoid. And, as Christians, to live our lives balancing our desire to cling to the familiar and comfortable, with God's invitation to embrace the unfamiliar and uncomfortable. But if we can do that, then we will find ourselves growing spiritually, and we'll find our lives filled with more joy.

Remember the words of Winston Churchill: *We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give*. And that, my friends, is the Good News.