

Luke 10:25-37

July 11, 2010

When I was nineteen years old and a sophomore in college, an acquaintance asked me if I believed in God. I remember the incident like it was yesterday. We were walking along together on our way to the nearest happy hour and out popped the question. But I remember it, not because the question was so surprising- after all ‘what is the meaning of life’ type questions like these are a dime a dozen in college...

What surprised me was not the question, but my answer. When my friend asked me if I believed in God, I quickly dodged the question, and replied instead simply, that *I believed in love*. Now obviously, I have revised my answer to that question a bit since then. But I remember that moment because, it is the first time I remember actually having what you might call a conviction. A belief I didn’t even know I had until it welled up inside me and flew from my mouth.

From a distance of some twenty plus years, I can’t help but look back at that 19 year old girl with a certain mixture of pride and amusement. Pride because, in the end love really is the answer to life’s question. As first John tells us, “love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God- for God is love.” But I shake my head in amusement, because love being the answer to life’s question isn’t the problem. It’s the actual loving that’s the tricky part. And at nineteen, this was something I was just beginning to understand.

Loving seems simple enough, sometimes it flows from us and through us as easy and natural as rocking a baby in our arms or holding the hand of the one we love. But at other times it requires every ounce of fortitude and drop of patience we can muster. Sure love sounds all warm and fuzzy but it turns out be a great deal more complicated.

And yet, Love is the answer.

You know it, I know it. Even the Beatles knew it.

But Knowing that love is the answer, and actually knowing who to love, when to love, how much to love, how to love-well, that’s the answer we’re all trying to figure out.

And so I can relate to the lawyer in today’s gospel. He, too, knows that love is the answer. He knows that in order to inherit God’s life giving love and presence both now and in the age to come, he must love God with all of his heart, soul, strength and mind and his neighbor as himself. He answers rightly; in fact Jesus tells him so. But he recognizes that his answer really isn’t good enough, if he doesn’t really know what it means.

And so he asks Jesus a different question, “Who is my neighbor?” He’s looking for some guidance, some way to get a handle on this love business. And in reply, Jesus, the One who has come to show us the way to love and the way to be loved- tells us a story, the parable of the Good Samaritan.

When the early Church Father’s interpreted the parable of the Good Samaritan they did not see an object lesson about loving people who are different from us or even a story about helping those in trouble. Rather they

viewed the entire narrative as an icon for the community of faith. Unlike modern scholarship which tends to emphasize the hostile relationship between the Samaritans and the Jewish people- the ancient scholars saw instead an *allegory* for the transformative work of the Church. In the early Church, learning to love like Christ was seen as a community endeavor that is what they believed the parable of the Good Samaritan to be about.

In the imaginative interpretation of the early Church writers, the city of Jerusalem represents the City of God, that heavenly kingdom for which we are all intended. And Jericho is that earthly city, where the cares and occupations of this life burden and consume us with strife. The man in the story is traveling in the wrong direction, headed toward Jericho, going down a steep and treacherous path that leaves him vulnerable to the sins of the world. The brokenness of the world, personified by the robbers, strip him and beat him and leave him half-dead, immobile and stranded.

The priest and the Levite are going down the same road, also headed in the wrong direction, when they come upon the beaten man. But they are so caught up in their social conventions and obligations that they fail to recognize their true calling and so pass by an opportunity to make a difference in the life of someone who needs them.

But a Samaritan, someone unexpected, someone totally Other comes near.

Love and mercy intervene.

He tends to the man's wounds and brings him to an Inn-- a mysterious outpost, hovering somewhere between that heavenly kingdom and the city of strife. For the ancient authors of commentary, the wine and oil that the Samaritan uses to treat the man's wounds were thought to represent the elements of Baptism and Eucharist— thus making an experiential link between the Scripture and the sacraments of the early church.

In the world of the story, The Inn becomes the Church.

It is at the Inn, in the comfort of that strange way-station- that the process of healing will continue. And it is to the Inn Keeper, that the Samaritan entrusts this beaten, broken one. But before the Samaritan leaves, he makes a payment and a promise to the Inn Keeper- He gives him two days wages, enough for today and a down payment on the future. He equips him to fulfill the task to which he has been entrusted, adjuring him to spend it all and then some.

I resonate with this ancient, allegorical interpretation of the story, even if it is a bit imaginative-- because it reminds me of my own story. Just five short years after my heartfelt proclamation of the power of love- I was all but disillusioned.

Life wasn't turning out like I thought it should. And true love, real love was harder to come by and harder to give than I expected. Like the man traveling to Jericho I found myself wounded and stranded on the road to nowhere. That is until Love & Mercy intervened.

It was to another mysterious outpost, known as Trinity Church, that the Good Samaritan brought me. It was at that strange Inn on Jackson Avenue in New Orleans that I began to learn about love and about God the source of all Love. There in the midst of liturgy, in bible study and at community suppers I found the soothing comfort

of forgiveness, the oil of acceptance and belonging. There among the gathered faithful, in honest conversation and in prayer, - I also felt the sting of wine poured on my open wounds, as truth brought forth the painful self-awareness so essential to real transformation. And soon enough- slowly but surely, almost imperceptibly, I began to play a different part in the drama-- who could have predicted that in the end, the man beaten and left half dead, would become an Inn Keeper.

I do not wish to imply that the Church is the only context in which we learn about love, after all we grow and learn to love through all of our relationships, families, friends and communities.

God's love and transformation is not bounded, it goes everywhere.

Sadly for some the Church is more of an icon of brokenness than of blessing, for others it just feels empty. But it need not be so- for we are the Church. The Church is you and me living imperfect lives in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the end the Church will be as authentic and transformative as WE choose to be.

Today, we will baptize five babies into the flawed but persistent community of love we call the Church. As newly baptized members of Christ body, we welcome them to Love's unfolding drama and we bid them to become a part of God's story. It is hard to believe looking at these bright beautiful babies, that in years to come they may from time to time find themselves hurt and stranded on the road to nowhere. Today, through the sacrament of baptism, we proclaim our belief that through Christ, Love and Mercy will find them on that road. And we promise that we as inn keepers will receive them, love them and expend all of the gifts God has given us to fulfill His promise.

As they grow in years, we pray that they too will become faithful inn keepers. That through the communion of the Church they might find true and lasting friendship, that they might discover a way to love that finds its' source in God's unfailing love for them, and when love gets complicated and difficult, we pray that they will find here the forgiveness, strength and courage to keep on loving, again and again.

The story of the Good Samaritan never ends. The plot will circle around again and again. Our role will change and shift. This is the drama where we work out love's answer in our lives. Like the man on Jericho Road, we will periodically find ourselves in deep need, it is then that we must allow ourselves to be loved, to some how find the grace to receive God's love and mercy.

Through the rhythms and relationships of our common life we will forever learn and relearn the ways of love.

And then ultimately, we will be called to put our love to purpose.

For miracle of miracles, Christ has given us a share in his eternal priesthood, beckoning us to leave the Inn and join him on the road- Extending the Love and Mercy of the Good Samaritan to all people.

Whether you are: Half-dead, Inn keeper or Samaritan,--It doesn't really matter where you hop into the story- Just jump in. But Don't pass by on the other side. We will never fully get a handle on this love business, but we can play our part.

Love's unfolding drama is our inheritance, Just Jump In: Do this and you will live. Amen.