

Riffs on Love

I told Charlie that I would use the lectionary and he pointed out that that gave me four choices. As I read the Scripture, two things happened: I was bothered by everything but the psalm (which is a nice hymn of praise) and I was struck by how the other three readings intersect with each other. On the day when I meant to call Charles to tell him which Scripture I was using, I ended up calling to tell him I couldn't make a choice, and you would have to put up with me talking about several at once.

Scripture summaries

The first reading is from Acts. It's after Easter and we, as Christians, are reminding ourselves about how the Jesus movement got started. One of the biggest conflicts of the early church was whether they should remain a sect of Judaism or include Gentiles and grow to be something different. So the story goes: it's after Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has been poured out and the Hebrews are noticing that even the Gentiles seem to have been touched by it. Peter says, "we can't exclude these Gentiles. The holy spirit is theirs, too." So he orders them to be baptized and invites them to stay several days. If I'm reading my history right, Peter is breaking the rules. Good Jewish people were not supposed to eat and stay with Gentiles. Thanks to Peter, what will become the Christian faith is being declared radically inclusive.

Moving on to the epistle, we have a lovely exercise in logic: everyone who believes Jesus is the Christ is a child of God. Everyone who loves the parent loves the child. Therefore, if you love God you will love all believers. When you love another, you are showing your love of God.

5:2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.

5:3 For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome,

And, finally, the Gospel: as the father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Now how could all these riffs on love possibly have me bothered? I know from experience that if I am irritated by Scripture, that's usually a good sign. It's God taking advantage of a teachable moment. So I started digging into this feeling, and found it had three facets.

- These scriptures talk about obedience.

- They talk about sacrifice.
- And they face outward.

Obedience as Iterative Process

I think being a youngest child may make obedience easier. I got to watch my older siblings make the mistakes and experience the results. By the time I was around, the rules were pretty much set down, even the strange ones: if you said you didn't like something at the dinner table, you got more of it and if you had to leave the dinner table to go to the bathroom, it cost you a nickel. My older siblings were the cause of creation of those rules. For them, the rules were consequences. For me, it's just the way things were. By personality and training, I follow the rules. I obey.

But that's the *little* rules.

I have gotten a lot of help in my life from the 12 steps. Step three is to turn your will and your life over to the God of your understanding. That was not—that is not—an easy thing for me. The first time I worked the 12 steps I was in my early 20s. I was pretty sure that God wanted everybody to give away everything they owned and become missionaries in places of deepest poverty. I wasn't sure I wanted to do that. I had already been diagnosed with MS and wasn't sure I *could* do it, so it took me a long time to be willing to take that step. But if you know anybody who is working the 12 steps, you know that they do not enter that process when life is going well for them.

The metaphor goes: you've been careening your car down a mountain road crashing into rocks. Maybe it's time to let somebody else drive. Luckily, in 12 step groups, there is an understanding of—and a compassion for—the fact that you will grab the steering wheel back on a regular basis.

I think the understanding of obedience as a repetitive process is part of the Christian faith. Using traditional language we sin, we repent, we are forgiven, we try to do better. We obey God's commandments and then we mess up and don't and then we catch ourselves—or we catch each other—and do...and so on and so on.

God's Commandments Are Not Burdensome

What's nice is the letter writer assures us that God's commandments are not burdensome. A little less than six months after my diagnosis, my MS flared up... they call it an exacerbation.

This was unfortunate, because the diagnosing neurologist had told me that if I could go six months without an exacerbation, I would have a mild case of MS. In some people, MS is fairly benign. They are tired, or numb, or their eyes don't work so well sometimes. Other people go from diagnosis to wheelchair in a matter of months. So that second stay in the hospital because of MS was a hard one. I imagined a very bleak future.

My friend Carolyn Peterson was a young woman in the 1950s with two-year-old and three-month-old babies when she contracted polio. She was in the same sort of dark mood when she received a card in the contagion ward that quoted Romans 8:28 “for those who love God all things work together for good.” The note on the card said, “you may not understand this now, but it's true.” Carolyn says she thought, at the time, that the card sender was full of it. She also says that she believes that Scripture now.

This is the point at which, if you wanted a two-hour service, I could summarize my book. My work with chronic illness is to open to the changes it is bringing, allow myself to feel the uncertainty and grief those changes bring, make my peace with my new life, and return to doing things I love. Bad things happen to us. Life is burdensome, but God is always working toward healing—bringing us to wholeness. Romans 8:28 is not a Pollyanna statement that everything is good. It is a defiant affirmation of the transforming power of the divine.

So when I get tangled up over the idea of obedience to God's commands, I need to remember that God's commands are not burdensome and obedience is a process.

To Lay down One's Life

The Gospel reading says God's commandment is that we love one another. That doesn't sound too burdensome. Where I get stuck is with that next sentence: No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. Oddly, my problem is not with the idea that I could love someone so much I would sacrifice my life for theirs. I am, after all, a mother and a wife. In this season of Easter, though, this bumps me against the idea that “Jesus died for my sins.” Frankly, I have trouble with that. I have always had trouble with that. I will believe that we are sinful species, frequently separating ourselves from God. But it's never made any sense to me that the solution to that would be for a Hebrew prophet to die a horrible death. Or even, on days of my more traditional Christology, for the son of God to die a horrible death. I don't get it.

I started to get it a little bit with CS Lewis's idea that Jesus came to show us how it's done. Lewis felt that his greatest impediment to being with God was his ego, his sense of himself as really hot stuff. So Lewis says Jesus gave up his life to show us how necessary it is for us to give up our egos in order to become one with God.

Lewis found that his pride got between him and his God. For me, it's almost the opposite.

Where my mind goes, when it's dark, is to the idea that I am a burden. Not only do I live with a fair amount of pain and frustration, but I bring pain and frustration to those around me. Those I love most are most affected and I worry about dragging them down. Their choices and resources are limited by my circumstance.

I read this week that “everyone who loves the parent loves the child” and that “the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” Having been raised by liberal parents in the late 20th century, I have learned that excluding groups of people is wrong. I don't find myself stuck in generalizations. There are certain individuals, however, who I find it very difficult to love and the one who is hardest to love is sitting right in this chair.

When I am feeling unlovable and unworthy, I have to turn the Golden rule on its head. Instead of doing unto others as I would have them do unto me, I have to have the compassion for myself that I could more easily have for others.

Jesus came to show us how it's done. That gets me part of the way there.

To lay down one's life for one's friends...

As an organism, my most basic instinct is to cling to life.

Loving one another is easy when it's easy. (sing) loving you is easy cause you're beautiful. When you're not beautiful, when you're bugging me, it's not so easy. When you are mean to me, my instinct is not to love you. Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong calls Jesus' love “a wasteful love...a love that overflows every human boundary.” When those around Jesus followed him, he loved them. When they cheered him, he loved them. When they denied him, he loved them. When they killed him, he loved them.

That is the love of God's commandment. That is the sacrifice we are called to make.

Facing Outward

Which brings me to my last stumbling place: love faces outward.

I am an introvert. I like to think. I like to read and write. I like to make art. I am happiest by myself in the quiet. Enough time in the quiet can be refreshing, renewing, energizing. God has use for me there, but I can't stay there. In fact, it's dangerous for me to stay there. If I spend too much time by myself, I get drawn into the pain and the limitations and the burdens.

One of the best models of Christian life I've heard was given to me by my college roommate (who I suspect heard it from someone else). The best lived life, she said, is like an infinity

symbol—you know, that figure 8 on its side. After time spent facing inward (prayer and contemplation, in traditional thought), I need to face outward and move into loving action.

In the church I attend, we are doing a study of the historical Jesus. My pastor asked us “how has your understanding of Jesus changed from when you were a child?” Ed Galle said, “I know now it's all about love.” Ed is in his early 80s and he just got back from Liberia, Africa. 20 years ago, he and other General Mills scientists and engineers founded an organization called Compatible Technology International to use what they knew to help increase food supply in developing countries. Ed was in Liberia to show people how to use the food grinders that CTI manufactures and provides. The folks at CTI are working in an infinity symbol model: they spend time in the shop designing and building. They go out into the field to test and train. It looks to me like Ed, too, is all about love.

Of course, part of why I admire Ed is because he is obeying the God I understood in my 20s. I have a bigger God now. The God of my middle-aged understanding rejoices when people leave behind the lives they know to serve the poor in developing countries. My God also is glad when people deepen the lives they have by appreciating beauty or taking a deep breath or being kind to each other. God even likes it when introverts in wheelchairs grope to make sense of the ideas of believers of ancient times. My God is delighted when anyone reaches for the divine and, in the reaching, is propelled into love.

My discomfort with the Scriptures has brought me here:

I am called to obedience: to turn my will and my life over to God, and to do that again and again.

I am called to sacrifice my obsession with myself, whether I am obsessed with how great I am, or how hard I've had it, or how much I weigh, or how busy I am, or what a burden I am.

I am called to wasteful love, a love that goes against my instincts. Love that includes those people I most want to push away, an inclusion so radical, it even extends to me.

I am called to find a rhythm between inward prayer and contemplation and outward service to others and action in the world.

And the result promised is simple and logical and glorious: If I keep the commandment to love, I will abide in love. God's joy will be in me, and my joy will be complete.