

Church of the Crossroads
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 18, 2007
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LOVING IN THE MANNER OF CHRIST

2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

In Sergey Prokofiev's ballet, called simply *The Prodigal Son*, there is the scene in which the boy is returning to his father. He literally crawls slowly, inch by inch, on his hands and knees, repentant and contrite, towards the father who remains sequestered in the house. It is a wrenching scene, an agonizing thing to watch.

Certainly, Prokofiev portrayed the return of the son this way to achieve an emotional and dramatic effect. Yet, the ballet does not ring true to the parable as it was told by Jesus. The parable tells us that the boy

. . . set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

- Luke 15:20-24

The son has come to define his life by the worst thing that he has ever done. He has squandered his father's inheritance and has ended up tending pigs, a disgraceful, unholy task for a good Jewish boy. The boy regards himself as despicable and sinful.

But the boy is more than this. His worth as a human being cannot be identical with the worst thing he has done in his life. This is what the father sees. In his son, the father sees a human being worthy of dignity and honor. He does not even ask his son what he has done. He does not wait for his son

to crawl towards him. He runs out of the house, and without saying one word, embraces him.

The son's confession is not required by the father. It is an after-thought. Immediately, the father places orders for a grand party in honor of his son who was lost and is now found.

If the younger brother regards himself as worthless and sees his identity wrapped up in his sinful behavior, the older brother's identity is wrapped up in righteous behavior. This too is wrong. Behavior, whether sinful or righteous, does not measure the worth of a human being. In the sight of God, all human beings have worth and dignity. All human beings are to be honored.

Certainly, behavior that harms others is not to be condoned. It is to be confronted and redeemed. But we human beings are more than what we do or do not do. We are more than the wrongs we have committed or the good we have accomplished.

This is the conclusion that Sister Helen Prejean came to as she came to know and love convicted murderer Matthew Poncelet. Mark Wilson and I heard Sister Helen describe her faith journey last Sunday afternoon at Chaminade University. You may recall that Sister Helen was the nun whose story was dramatized in the film *Dead Man Walking*.

Sister Helen came to know Matthew Poncelet as more than the crime he had committed. Her relationship with him began when she was asked to write him when he was on death row after his conviction. Thus began a correspondence that led to a face-to-face meeting, and then an abiding friendship. She accompanied Matthew to his execution. She told him that he was a child loved by God. She told him that in the death chamber he was to look into her eyes, and in looking in her eyes, he would be looking into the eyes of Christ.

During the course of her talk, she said that we should imagine a screen being displayed for each of us, and on that screen would be written the worst thing we had ever done in our life. "Would that define who you are?" she said. "No, you are much more than that," she went on to say. We are human beings loved by God. We are human beings worthy of redemption and honor.

This is how God regards us. This is how Christ regarded the sinners who gathered around him. This is how the father regarded his wayward son.

Because of this insight, which she identifies as the good news of the Gospel, Sister Helen has become an opponent of the death penalty. She wants to eradicate this practice in this nation of ours. She says, however, that we may be the last nation on earth to abolish the death penalty, simply because we have become the most violent nation on earth. Violence has become our answer to the issues that confront us. We have become a nation of retaliation, a nation enamored by the ethic of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” This, however, is the opposite of what Jesus taught and lived.

The problem is that although the United States is often described as a Christian nation, Americans actually do not know what Jesus taught. Recent polls reveal that 75% of American adults believe that the Bible teaches that “God helps those who help themselves.” More than 10% think that Noah’s wife was Joan of Ark. Only half cannot name one of the four gospels and – a finding that will surprise many – evangelical Christians are only slightly more knowledgeable than their non-evangelical counterparts!

So it should come to us as no surprise that many Americans assume that Jesus taught an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” ethic. He taught the opposite. He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well, and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” (Matthew 5:39-41)

Reflecting the love of God, Jesus reached out to human beings just as they were and viewed them as the human beings that could become. This is how we, too, are to view others. We are to love in the manner of Christ. We are to regard others as human beings worthy of honor and dignity. This is what the Apostle Paul meant when to the Corinthian church he wrote,

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view, even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything has become new!

- 2 Corinthians 5:16, 17

This will surely put the Christian community at odds with a society that so often view human beings as unredeemable and worthy of execution. But there is more to say. For our society also tends to demean human life in other ways. Human beings are often viewed in terms of their economic usefulness or their potential as consumers. Human beings are used rather than honored.

Perhaps worst of all, the peoples of the affluent West can easily view other peoples of the earth as dispensable and unworthy of help. Roméo Dallaire, the Canadian general who headed up the U. N. Mission in Rwanda, has said that the basic tragedy in that country was that the rest of the world regarded the Rwandans as less than human. Therefore, the genocide was allowed to go on unabated.

It must be different with us. We are to love in the manner of Christ, the One who embraced others as they were and as the human beings they were on the way of becoming. Certainly, in order to love in that manner, we need to regard ourselves as human beings who are more than the worst thing we have done in our lives. That may be the most difficult task of all. The forgiveness of one's self is so much more difficult than the forgiveness of others. And yet our forgiveness of others is bound up with our own forgiveness of ourselves. Since it takes so long for us to forgive ourselves, no wonder it at times takes us so long to forgive others!

In the body of Christ, because we are all too human, it is easy for us to focus on the behavior of others and see others in terms of what they have done (or not done, for that matter), or in terms of the irritating quirks of their personalities (as if we ourselves did not have the same kind of irritating quirks!). This conventional way of regarding others is not in keeping with the way Christ loved. Loving in the manner of Christ is embodied in the father of our parable, who ran out to embrace his son, not looking upon him in judgment but in compassion, not holding his past against him but supporting him into the future, not seeing him for the wrong that he did but for the human being he was on the way of becoming.

My brothers and sisters, may we do likewise, and may this be our witness in the world that so often regards human beings as less-than-human objects to be used or disregarded rather than as the beloved children of God. Let us love in the manner of Christ. May it be so. Amen.