

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Sep 11th 2014

Today's readings challenge our notion of what it means to love, stripping it of sentimentality, obligation, reciprocity, doing the minimum or whatever else we usually associate with it.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians explores the morality of eating meat which has been slaughtered for pagan worship, not just as an act in itself as "right" or "wrong," determined by what is prescribed by law, but rather in terms of its context: what effect is it going to have on the faith of the community? Will it build up their faith? Will Christians be seen as lukewarm in their faith - ambivalent about their beliefs, values and commitments - if they are seen eating meat sacrificed to idols? He invites them to a more sophisticated moral reasoning, clearly encouraging them to think about their lives and their behavior in terms of what is most loving for others - what will build up the faith of the community - not in terms of personal preferences, legalism or convenience.

Today's Gospel also has Jesus challenging his disciples to expand their notion of love beyond anything they have previously imagined. "Do you think it is enough to do good to those who will treat you well, to love those whose love you know will be returned?" Christian love - generosity, forgiveness, honesty, trust, integrity etc. - is not motivated by obligation nor an expectation of reciprocity. Christian love is allowing God's generosity, forgiveness, honesty, trust integrity to be manifest through us - it is not something we do, it is what God does in and through us.

So, for example, Christian forgiveness. There is no room for vengeance nor retaliation if we are injured, and we ought to seek justice and reparation if that is called for. But more often than not the forgiveness we struggle with is harm to our fragile egos. Jesus invites us to forgive those who harm us not from a position of moral superiority or self-righteousness, nor because we are fulfilling the Christian obligation to forgive, nor to model passivity but rather from the truth of our human frailty - that we all stand in need of forgiveness and all are given the grace to forgive through God's magnanimity. We forgive others through being deeply grounded in our faith - knowing that there is more here than I can see or know or judge fairly.

The other day I heard someone misquote the "golden rule" - they believed it was morally OK to treat others poorly if they have mistreated you. More often we hear the "golden rule" quoted as "treating others the way you would want to be treated". Sounds minimalistic to me - being "nice" - not at all what Jesus is suggesting here. I am grateful for the people in my life who gave me what I needed, even when it was challenging, rather than what they would have wanted for themselves.

Who knows what transformation might occur, for me or others, if I allow God's grace to pierce my conflicts, struggles and relationships? What conversion might there be if God's grace, acting through me, loves and forgives generously with no strings attached?

Today Jesus invites us to receive this grace of forgiveness for ourselves and to extend it to others: "You are not bound to me, you do not "owe" me, you are not in my debt. In addition, do not bind yourself in self hatred or shame. In God's love you are free."

Diane Jorgensen - Creighton University Student