

A Generous Acceptance

Easter 5C May 2, 2010

Sister Mary Ann, who worked for a home health agency, was making her rounds. She was visiting homebound patients when she ran out of gas. As luck would have it, a gas station was just a block away. She walked to the station to borrow a gas can and buy some gas. The attendant told her that the only gas can he owned had been loaned out, but she could wait until it was returned. Since Sister Mary Ann was on the way to see a patient, she decided not to wait and walked back to her car. She looked for something in her car that she could fill with gas and spotted the bedpan she was taking to the patient. Always resourceful, Sister Mary Ann carried the bedpan to the station, filled it with gasoline, and carried the full bedpan back to her car. As she was pouring the gas into her tank, two Baptists watched from across the street. One of them turned to the other and said, "If it starts, I'm becoming Catholic."

Several members of the Tutsi tribe enter the home of a Hutu family in the middle of the night with machetes in hand. By the time they leave, the entire family has been hacked into pieces.

A 19 year old Palestinian woman, a student of biology at a local university, straps a belt loaded with 100 steel balls and enough C-4 to flatten a city block, walks into a crowded cafe in Tel-Aviv and blows herself and 35 other people away.

A group of high school students decide the new student, recently relocated from Ireland, is not like them, not wanted and must go. They begin to consistently and systematically attack her mentally and emotionally with hate speech and many other forms of psychological and physical violence until one day she decides she cannot take it any more and hangs herself.

A group of largely white and privileged members of a suburban community one begin to feel uncomfortable, fearful and angry seeing the growing numbers of dark-skinned, relatively poor people in their area. They develop a plan to repeatedly complain to the Mayor and the Chief of Police urging them to bring the powers of government to bear "on the problem." Within weeks, the police begin paying extra attention, making lots of arrests and sending the signal, "You are not wanted here....If you are going to be here, you must remain invisible."

A man is denied the position he sought, not because he was unqualified and not because there was someone better able to fill the position, but simply because he is gay. The employer is threatened by and uncomfortable with gay people he knows to be gay.

Half of the members of St. Clement's Episcopal Church get up, walk out and start their own church because they do not agree with the other half's ideas about how to interpret the Bible and the reality of climate change.

Much of human history seems to point to a commitment to a particular idea; the idea of separation, the doctrine which says the fundamental reality is that of separation, division, otherness as unacceptable and threatening. Rather than living our lives from an assumption of unity with one another and all of the creation, we relate to one another and the world from an assumption of mistrust born of separation. This seems reasonable given the process by which our egos are formed. During the first six months of life, psychologists think the infant has no sense of being a distinct other, a

unique self. Her world is limited to experiencing stimuli from her caregiver and the surrounding environment. Then something happens. Between months 4 & 8, the infant begins to experience the maternal caregiver as an other, as a separate person. ***"The infant becomes aware of her specific mother....the mother is recognizedNo longer will a stranger elicit a smile....eight month stranger anxiety marks the attainment of a new level of development....Directed action is now possible and enables the infant to learn or invent devices for keeping the mother near her."*** (Gertrude & Rubin Blanck) In fact, the task of childhood development is, to a great degree, the task of the ego learning to acquire those skills that will allow it to survive independently in the world. Our most formative years are all about separation, about the exciting and terrifying task of learning how to take care of ourselves, "to stand on our own two feet" apart from our parents without too much trauma, damage or death.

Native American spirituality assumes life is a circle; the sacred path toward an ever-increasing consciousness of God will lead us to reencounter aspects of life again and again. Today's reading from Acts in which Peter is invited to both reexamine the assumptions embedded within his own religious tradition and to overcome his prejudice against those outside his own community as well as Jesus' teaching about the centrality of love lead us to journey back to where we began. They invite us into the spiritual work of quieting our ego's need to understand ourselves as fundamentally separate from others; the spiritual work of overcoming our habit of seeing the other as not only different, but unacceptably different. In other words, the spiritual path of Jesus calls us to walk the circle, to return to the place where our commitment to separation first took place and then go beyond separation toward reunion & unity.

And by unity, I do not mean the dissolution of difference, but rather the full, unconditional embrace & acceptance of the other in all of his or her differentness. This is the kind of unity, reunion, restoration that only divine love can bring. The love talked about in the life of Jesus and throughout the New Testament is not limited to the love of two people who share all things in common, who have no real differences, who see the world in exactly the same way and therefore like each other. As Jesus noted, it is easy to love someone who loves you. Such love is natural to our ego. What is supernatural, the kind of love that transcends the ego's devotion to separation and mistrust of the other is the sacred love which declares to the other, "Your differentness is a gift to me. Your disagreement with my thinking is a gift to me. Your differences in religious and cultural heritage are all gifts to me. Your difference in opinion and perspective is a gift to me. Your difference in skin color and sexual orientation are gifts to me. You do not threaten me, you enrich and bless me....'Namaste,' the sacred within me recognizes the sacred within you." This is the love of Jesus which dwells in all our hearts, the love that empowers us to overcome division, fear and prejudice through the full acceptance and embrace of the other.

Our vocation is to open the eyes of our soul, to open our interior eyes and recognize the two realities competing inside of us: the deep mistrust of others in their differentness and the love of God which calls us to overcome mistrust with an open vulnerability and to overcome rejection with a generous acceptance. This is the path of Jesus. This is the work we have been give to do. AMEN.