

Ordinary 20A - August 19-20, 2017

The story is told about a woman who brought her husband to their pastor and told him, "I feel that my husband doesn't love me as much he should. So we're thinking of getting a divorce, but we want to know what you think." So the pastor said to the husband, "The Bible says you should love your wife as much as Christ loved his church. Can you do that?" He says, "No, I don't think so." The pastor says, "Well, then begin at a lower level. The Bible also says that you should love your neighbor as you love yourself. Can you at least love her as much as you would love a neighbor?" The husband says, "No. That's still too difficult." In exasperation, the pastor finally told him, "The Bible says, 'Love your enemies'. Start there." (*From Learning to Love, by Erwin Lutzer in Preaching Today, Tape No. 99. From the Bible Illustrator, Parsons Technology, Hiawatha, IA.*)

We live in a world where prejudice makes it difficult to love everyone as God loves. If you are like me, our first reaction to what happened in Charlottesville is a sense of outrage at people who are so full of hate they have to travel to be with others to express their hatred for other human beings. Then upon further reflection, there is prejudice everywhere, often just below the surface. "We will Jew him down" or "Indian giver" common phrases I heard growing up. Slang terms for people with different skin colors abound.

In the past year, I have belonged to several groups on Facebook that deal with motorcycles. I am taken aback by how often comments are made about gender identity. It seems to be the most common way of expressing dislike for another person's preferences in choosing a motorcycle brand. When I have challenged it, the response is, "We are just kidding around - get over it." Yet the comments are rooted in long held belief that a gay male is not as masculine or as intelligent or as good as a straight man. So if you choose X brand of bike, then you are gay.

If you want to see racism in action just ask someone what they think of "Black lives matter".

This problem clearly existed at the time of Jesus, and is well documented in our Gospel today. There were strong prejudices against: non Jews, against, women, against those with poor health and against the poor. In today's Gospel Jesus is approached for healing by a non-Jewish woman - she has two strikes against her.

Fr. Ron Rohlheiser approaches the Gospel from the perspective of the woman's faith matched against our own faith journey to overcome barriers that seem insurmountable.

In one of his books on contemplative prayer, Thomas Keating shares with us a line that he occasionally uses in spiritual direction. People come to him, sharing how they used to have a warm and solid sense of God in their lives but now complain that all that warmth and confidence have disappeared and they're left struggling with belief and struggling to pray as they used to. They feel a deep sense of loss and invariably this is their question: "What's wrong with me?" Keating's answer: *God is wrong with you!*

His answer, in essence, says this: Despite your pain, there is something very right with you. You have moved past being a religious neophyte, past an initiatory stage of religious growth, which was right for you for its time, and are now being led into a deeper, not lesser, faith. Moreover, that loss of fervor has brought you to a deeper maturity. So, in effect, what you're asking is this: I used to be quite sure of myself religiously and, no doubt, probably somewhat arrogant and judgmental. I felt I understood God and religion and I looked with some disdain at the world. Then the bottom fell out of my faith and my certainty and I'm now finding myself a lot less sure of myself, considerably more humble, more empathetic, and less judgmental. What's wrong with me?

Asked in this way, the question answers itself. Clearly that person is growing, not regressing.

Lost is a place too! Christina Crawford wrote those words, describing her own painful journey through darkness into a deeper maturity. To be saved, we have to first realize that we're lost, and usually some

kind of bottom has to fall out of our lives for us to come to that realization. Sometimes there's no other cure for arrogance and presumption than a painful loss of certitude about our own ideas about God, faith, and religion. John of the Cross suggests that a deeper religious faith begins when, as he puts it, we are forced to understand more by not understanding than by understanding. But that can be a very confusing and painful experience that precisely prompts the feeling: What's wrong with me?

An image is not the reality. An icon can be beautiful and helpful and point us in the right direction, but when mistaken for the reality it becomes an idol.

A curious, paradoxical dynamic lies behind this: We tend to confuse faith with our capacity on any given day to conjure up a concept of God and imagine God's existence. Moreover we think our faith is strongest at those times when we have affective and emotive feelings attached to our imaginations about God. Our faith feels strongest when bolstered by and inflamed by feelings of fervor. Great spiritual writers will tell us that this stage of fervor is a good stage in our faith, but an initiatory one, one more commonly experienced when we are neophytes. Experience tends to support this. In the earlier stages of a religious journey it is common to possess strong, affective images and feelings about God. At this stage, our relationship with God parallels the relationship between a couple on their honeymoon. On your honeymoon you have strong emotions and possess a certain certainty about your love, but it's a place you come home from. A honeymoon is an initiatory stage in love, a valuable gift, but something that disappears after it has done its work. A honeymoon is not a marriage, though often confused with one. It's the same with faith; strong imaginative images of God are not faith, though they're often confused with it.

Strong imaginative images and strong feelings about God are, in the end, just that, images. Wonderful, but images nonetheless, icons. An image is not the reality. An icon can be beautiful and helpful and point us in the right direction, but when mistaken for the reality it becomes an idol. For this reason, the great spiritual writers tell us that God at

certain moments of our spiritual journey "takes away" our certainty and deprives us of all warm, felt feelings in faith. God does this precisely so that we cannot turn our icons into idols, so that we cannot let the experience of faith get in the way of the end of faith itself, namely, an encounter the reality and person of God.

Mystics such as John of the Cross call this experience of seemingly losing our faith, "a dark night of the soul." This describes the experience where we used to feel God's presence with a certain warmth and solidity, but now we feel like God is non-existent and we are left in doubt. This is what Jesus experienced on the cross and this is what Mother Teresa wrote about in her journals.

And while that darkness can be confusing, it can also be maturing: It can help move us from being arrogant, judgmental, religious neophytes to being humble, empathic men and women, living inside a cloud of unknowing, understanding more by not understanding than by understanding, helpfully lost in a darkness we cannot manipulate or control, so as to finally be pushed into genuine faith, hope, and charity.