

You've likely noticed that the Easter gospels have all focused on love, for love lies at the center of the good news. Without it, St. Paul reminds us, our religion is utterly without meaning. We make what we're up to perfectly clear right from the beginning to folks who enter our Christian Initiation program here at St. Ann by reading paragraph 25 of the Catechism to them. It goes like this:

“The whole concept of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian charity spring from love, and have no other objective than to arrive at love.”<sup>1</sup>

There's our faith, in a nutshell. Want to be a Christian? OK - allow your life to be a giant lesson learning to love and helping others do so as well. Let there be no unnecessary impediments either, as the first reading reminds us. That being said, it's not always easy to love. In fact, it sometimes seems impossible and I'm certain we can all come up with a list of folks we find difficult to love. Paradoxically, that's a very good thing. Let me explain why with a story.

St. Theresa of Avila is one of the four female doctors of the Church, meaning that her insights and teaching are held to be authoritative and trustworthy. She led the so-called Carmelite reform back in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain for a number of years, traveling from one convent to the next, straightening things out. She's probably the last person anyone would ever think would have a problem loving anyone, but by her own admission, it was so.

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<sup>1</sup> CCC, #25

At one particular convent she encountered a nun to whom she took an immediate dislike. Didn't like the way she looked, acted, spoke or smelled. She had read the gospel we just heard a few minutes ago though, and knew that she was obliged to love this person.

So, she prayed about it. Didn't help. She prayed more. It got worse. Her dislike went from being mild distaste to rip-snorting hatred. No matter how much she prayed about it, matters seemed only to deteriorate. Finally, in exasperation, she prayed in so many words. "OK, look, God. I know I'm supposed to love this person. I simply can't; but You, living in me, You can love this person." And that's how she left it.

Many years later, after St. Theresa's death, her body lay in the nave of the church from which she was to be buried, and all the nuns were going by one by one, offering their prayers and sentiments, gathering in the sanctuary after they paid their respects.

Along came Sr. Petunia, and all the nuns stared at her intently, wondering what she was going to say, since many of them knew of St. Theresa's antipathy towards her. She got up to the casket, looked down at St. Theresa and then up at the rest of the community there in the sanctuary and said "You know, I think I was her favorite." Most of the nuns gasped, but a few instantly became aware of an awesome truth about the love of God.

St. Theresa's experience gave us an exquisite lesson in the difference between self-engineered love and the love that emerges when we actively and intentionally surrender to God. Paradoxically, it wasn't until she hit a brick wall that she realized that authentic love is actually God, dwelling within us, as the gospel explains, who is doing the loving within us; loving that connects our deepest selves to God and to those we are called to love in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. St. Theresa saw that there's a certain

self-forgetfulness that necessarily accompanies surrender to God that leads to acceptance of God's infinitely lovely and unfathomable ways within us even as we may be totally unaware that any such thing is going on.

How is it with you and me? When you and I receive the Eucharist, do we invite God to express God's love freely through Jesus Christ, present and living within us? Whose agenda is uppermost in our minds in the moment? Perhaps at times we might find ourselves like the young St. Theresa, angry and frustrated that we can't arrange love on our own terms. That may simply be God gently teaching us that if the love we express doesn't have its source in God's own indwelling within us, it's likely just another human project and not really love at all.

In his book *The Sacrament of the Current Moment*, the Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade told a similar little story about this back in the eighteenth century. Imagine, he wrote, that you're under attack by enemy forces bent on killing you. Looking around, you see no means of escape. Suddenly, someone you've never seen before appears before you and tells you that he can safely extract you from the situation. Would you follow him? If you chose to do so, then, during your escape, would you consider for a moment suggesting to your rescuer that he take a different path than the one along which you're being led?

Fr. De Caussade's story describes the human condition and the choices before us that are both stark and unavoidable. We can choose to surrender completely to the beautiful, unconditional love of the indwelling God expressed in Jesus Christ, design something all on our own or risk not loving at all. Had St. Theresa of Avila or Fr. Caussade lived in our time, they would both likely have urged us to consider the wisdom of the phrase "If God is your co-pilot, switch seats."