

Wondering how best to approach people, those of us who are involved with evangelization here at St. Ann find ourselves asking from time to time why anyone would want to be a Christian in this day and age. I'd like to suggest to you that the only reason anyone would ever choose to be a Christian is to love in the deepest possible sense of that word. From the earliest days of Christianity, even our enemies have remarked about us, "Look how they love one another." Beyond being just something we do from time to time love, it seems, is something Christians are.

Scripture tells us that everything lives, moves and has its being in the vast, unfathomable depths of God's unconditional love. So it is then, that anyone who encounters any of us ought to be able to expect that they're actually in the moment encountering a unique expression of some dimension of God's love.

My friend Ralph is something of a cynic and likes to tell me he's an atheist, although neither of us believes he really is. Ralph has little time for all this love stuff, he says. "There are some pretty hateful people in the world, Tim," he reminded me one day, "who would just as soon kill you as look at you."

"I've met some of them, Ralph," I told him. "in the jungles of Vietnam. There were some in our own barracks, too. Turns out no one has a monopoly on hate."

"Seems to me like a general failure of your Christianity, Tim," Ralph said. "You'd think after two thousand years or so people would've accepted your message of love if it made any sense. They haven't, and it doesn't, as far as I can see. It's still every man for himself, devil take the hindmost. That's just the way the world works. In this day and age, I can't fathom why anyone would seriously want to be a Christian."

"There's something I need to explain to you then, Ralph," I said. "Christianity's an open invitation to love; an invitation to follow Jesus, who shows us the way God loves and shares his very self with those who accept that invitation so we can love that way, too. No

one in any generation has ever had to accept that invitation, and some, like the haters you're describing, never have. But everyone has to choose. Freely consenting to God's presence and action within us, we can become the unique expressions of love that God made us each to be."

"If love's so wonderful, why would anyone ever choose 'no'?" Ralph wanted to know.

"Our egos get in the way, Ralph" I explained. "It becomes 'my will be done' rather than 'thy will be done,' as we pray in the Our Father. St. Paul, Thomas Merton and others call it the idolatry of the false self."

"What's a 'false self'?" Ralph asked.

"It's who we think we are," I said. "It's an image made up of what we have, what we do and what other people think of us. Everyone has one, and there's really nothing objectively wrong with it. It's how we present ourselves in society, describe what we can do and what we like. It's just not who we really are at our deepest core."

"Who are we at our deepest core, Tim?" Ralph asked.

"As St. Catherine of Genoa said Ralph," I told him, "'my deepest me is God.'"

"Are you telling me you think you're God?" Ralph asked, eyebrows raised.

"No, Ralph," I explained. "I'm not God, but my deepest me is all about Love. And since God is Love Ralph, well, go connect the dots. The reason we have bodies is not to cater to the fantasies of our false selves, but to make the love of God visible in our encounters with each other. There's truly no other reason to be around. Eventually, people discover that satisfaction of the ambitions of our false self and its appetites is much different than satisfaction of our deepest hunger, which can only be satisfied by Love, freely given and freely accepted. It can never be demanded, earned or clutched."

Ralph said he wasn't sure he understood, so I offered to tell him a story.

"Have at it," he replied.

"My youngest daughter, Meredith, plays the euphonium," I told him. "It's like a mini-tuba if you want to visualize it. She was excited about becoming a professional musician

and strove to be as nearly perfect a player as she could be. She took justifiable pride in presenting herself to other people as a competent professional musician.”

“One day, while she was learning how to play, she had a private lesson with her professor. In the middle of playing a certain piece he interrupted her. As she put her instrument down, her professor said ‘Meredith, no one wants to hear you play your euphonium.’ Crestfallen, she felt tears begin to well up, but her professor quickly continued. ‘What people want to hear is you telling them “I love you” through your euphonium. There is no other reason for anyone to listen to you, and no other reason for you to play.’ In that moment, she learned a profound lesson – being a professional anything was nowhere near as important as being a loving professional anything. Yes, her false self needed to have its bag of tricks, and there was nothing wrong with that at all, but the deeper need was for her to express her most authentic, true identity as a unique expression of God’s love. You see, Ralph, our false self, talented as it is, is what dies when our body dies. Our true self, the self that loves like God, the self that’s fed by the Eucharist, the self that God knows and loves, is eternal and can never die. Every Catholic ritual from our baptism to our funeral reminds us of that fundamental reality.”

Ralph nodded and I continued, “Our choice to love matters in everyday life, too, Ralph. Tell me, would you rather have a loving, professional dentist clean your teeth, or a harpoonist you felt was just doing the job? When you’re waited on in a store, who would you like to encounter? Someone who thinks you’re an inconvenience or someone who clearly wants to take care of you because it’s the loving thing to do? When you do anything, Ralph, which kind of person would you prefer to encounter? Which kind of person would you prefer to be? Your answers will tell you not only everything you need to know about why anyone, including yourself, would choose to be a Christian in this day and age, but also how you can pick them out.”