

Our Struggle with Love

Reflection by Brian Wigger

Several years ago, a Presbyterian minister and a friend of mine in Newport, Kentucky challenged his congregation to open its doors and its heart more fully to the poor. Initially the congregation responded with enthusiasm and a number of programs were introduced to invite people from the less-privileged economic areas of the city, including a number of street-people, to come to their church.

But the romance soon died as coffee cups and other loose items began to disappear, some hand bags stolen, purchases from SAMS stolen, and the church and meeting space were often left messy and soiled. A number of the congregation began to complain and demand an end to the experiment. "This isn't what we expected! Our church isn't clean and safe anymore! We wanted to reach out to these people and this what we get? This is too messy to continue!"

But the minister held his ground, pointing out that their expectations were naïve, that what they were experiencing was precisely part of the cost of reaching out to the poor and that Jesus assures us that loving is unsafe and messy, not just reaching out to the poor but in reaching out to anyone.

We like to think of ourselves as gracious and loving, but, truth be told, that's often predicated on a naïve notion of love. We struggle to love as Jesus invites us to love, namely, to *love each other as I have loved you*. The last clause in the sentence contains the real challenge: Jesus doesn't say love each other according to the spontaneous reactions of your heart; nor, love each other as society defines love. Rather, *love each other as I have loved you*.

And, for the most part, we struggle to do that. We struggle to be big-hearted and take the high road when we've been slighted or ignored, and we struggle then to let understanding and empathy replace bitterness and our urge to withdraw. We struggle to let go of grudges. We struggle to leave judgment to God and, we struggle to love and forgive our own selves, knowing that no mistake we make stands between us and God. We struggle to trust that God's love is enough and that we are forever held inside God's infinite mercy. Yes, love is a struggle.

I don't think there is anyone that wouldn't agree that to really love each other as Jesus asks us can be very difficult and challenging. It can be so easy to just talk about it as a nice idea. It is so much harder to actually love others, especially those that we find difficult to get along with or even talk to. It can and is so much easier to say prayers and sing hymns that tell us about love. It has been said, because we have prayed and precisely because we have prayed, we are challenged to turn our attention to those around us who need our help and support.

In our Gospel this weekend, we again hear Jesus warning us that whatever we do for each other, we do for Him. Then, whatever we fail to do for each other, we fail to do for Him. Whenever we love each other, we are loving Jesus. This coming week, hopefully each of us at SSC will turn our attention (once again) to those around us and love them as Jesus loves each of us