

TO LOVE ANOTHER PERSON IS TO SEE THE FACE OF GOD

Sometimes people are surprised to hear that Jesus only gave us one commandment. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

The ten commandments were not original with Jesus – they were given by God to Moses hundreds of years earlier, during the Exodus from Egypt that our first lesson described. What was original with Jesus was his embodying of God’s love, particularly in simple acts of love and service – washing the feet of his disciples, sharing his body and blood with them in the bread and the wine, healing and preaching and teaching.

Jesus on the night before he was executed was with his disciples. He loved the disciples who were with him, loved them to the bitter end, even though they fled in the face of danger and deserted him. As a way of showing his love for them, he did something very simple, he washed their feet. And Christians to this day, remembering Jesus’ love for us, remind ourselves that God’s love is still seen in such simple acts of service.

It really is very simple. God is love, and wherever love is, God is. Even for those who don’t know God or who don’t believe in God, whoever loves, is in the presence of God. As the song in the musical “Les Miserables” proclaims, “To love another person is to see the face of God.”

Last December I had to stay in the UCSF Hospital for 3 days to evaluate a drug I was being given for a heart fibrillation/heart flutter problem. I wasn’t sick, and felt fine, but the hospital staff kept coming in every few hours day and night for tests, and I didn’t get much rest.

My roommate’s curtains were drawn, and although I had heard various noises and saw nurses and other hospital types scurrying in and out I had no idea who he was or what he was in for.

The first morning, after a long sleepless night, I finally mustered up the courage to say something to him, through the drawn curtain. Gradually his story emerged. His name was Joe, from southern California. He was a diabetic, and as a result had just had all ten

toes amputated. (Can you imagine what a surprise he would be at a Maundy Thursday foot-washing!) He also had a bad case of colitis, which necessitated many nurse visits, since he was unable to get out of bed.

We gradually got to know each other's stories. He had been in maintenance work until his feet prevented him. He was interested to hear that I was a retired pastor – he said he attended church occasionally but he didn't know what denomination it was. Joe wanted to talk, and we talked at length, about forgiveness and love and life – basically about God.

One day I heard him talking on the phone to his daughter, saying how pleased he was that his roommate was a retired pastor, that I had given him a shave with my electric razor, and how he wanted one for Christmas. On several occasions he expressed to her how glad he was that I was his roommate, that I must have been put there for a reason, and twice he asked me to pray with him. So we held hands, and I prayed.

After I got out of the hospital, Ann and I tried to go see Joe on Christmas Day, but he had been released to a nearby rehab place. I tracked him down on the phone, we caught up with each other, and again he asked me to pray for him, over the phone. When I was finished, he added a prayer of his own, simple but touching, of thanks for my being there and for the beginnings of his healing. He was looking forward to going home, seeing his daughter, and getting used to the special shoes he was getting on his toe-less feet.

My initial dismay at having a roommate turned to a sense of gratitude to God for bringing Joe to me and me to Joe. Because much as he expressed his pleasure at my being there, Joe also brought a lot to me. In many ways it was an affirmation of my ministry, a chance to put God's love into action. I didn't wash his toe-less feet, but I did assure him of God's love and God's forgiveness and God's acceptance of all of us as beloved creatures with a place in God's plan for creation.

“To love another person is to see the face of God.” Each of us can show God's love in some way – by forgiving someone, or accepting forgiveness (which is sometimes harder!), by letting go of a grievance, by feeding someone, by reaching out to someone who is lonely or hurting, by loving someone, even someone who seems unlovable. We all have parts of

ourselves that need to die, the part of us that enjoys being bitter or angry or unforgiving, being negative or complaining, the part of us that doesn't want to let go, in order to let the Christ in me reach out to the Christ in you. No one said it would be easy or painless to bear the cross of Christ. But without something dying in us, there can be no true resurrection either. "To love another person is to see the face of God."