

Confrontational Christianity

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear brothers and sister in Christ: Back in the sixties, in response to that tumultuous time of social upheaval and violent protest, the *Beatles* sang, “*All You Need is Love*”. Though not a new or original idea, it was a message that seemed to resonate in the hearts of millions: “*Love is the answer*”. It was felt that if only we could all adopt a “live and let live” attitude, stop criticizing one another, mind our own business, and just accept everybody the way they are, well, then all the world’s problems would go away. We could live in happiness, peace, and prosperity—it would be the dawn of a new age: the Age of Aquarius, full of harmony and understanding. And it’s still a dominant idea in our culture: that all we need to do is “love”. And that specifically means that we need to avoid any kind of conflict or confrontation because they are inherently judgmental, controlling, manipulative, and mean. Much better simply to get along with each other, smile on your brother, everybody get together, try to love one another *right now*.

In two of today’s readings from Holy Scripture, however, we get an entirely different picture of what love is and how it is to be shown in the lives of God’s people. Here we see a love that does not “live and let live” and “accept everybody the way they are”; but instead, it’s a love that, when it sees a moral problem in someone else’s life, goes out of its way to seek confrontation. It’s a love that aims to achieve true reconciliation and peace not by ignoring or pretending to overlook sin in a Christian brother or sister; but faces it head on, brings it into the light, and decisively deals with it with the hard and painful truth.

First we heard about King David. He thought he had effectively covered up his adulterous affair with Bathsheba by orchestrating the battlefield death of her husband. Modern standards of “love” would suggest that at this point it would probably be best for David and the nation of Israel if the whole thing were allowed to remain where it is: nicely swept out of sight under the carpet. Let’s forget about it. We don’t need the public scandal. After all, David is *usually* a pretty good guy. And he’s been good for the nation. He brought us peace and prosperity. Things are going great. Why mess with that? *Okay*, so he had a moment (or two) of weakness, who hasn’t? He married the woman in the end. She’s happy. And there is nothing anyone can do for her former husband now. So why create a big flap about it? God is love, isn’t he? Doesn’t he accept us just the way we are?

No, he doesn’t. It’s true that God is love, and because of that he *can’t* accept us the way we are. Instead he *takes* us the way we are and *makes* us acceptable by changing us. So he sends to David the prophet Nathan who confronts him with his sin by telling him a little story about the theft of a lamb. Soon David is hopping mad about that dirty rotten scoundrel who did such a terrible thing. In righteous indignation he carries on about how such a man deserves to die. And the prophet thumps David on the chest and says, “I’m glad you think so, because I’m talking about you!” This has the effect of tearing David’s heart out—he’s completely crushed and ashamed, his sinful soul naked before the Lord. It’s a terrifying place to be. And yet this is a vital part of how the Lord brings David to repentance and then shows him his love by forgiving his sin. *That’s* what changes David. *That’s* what heals and cleanses his spirit, and restores the relationship with the Lord that had been broken by his sin. Experiencing God’s love through his forgiveness is what empowers a person to live as a child of God and reflect his love.

This is further illustrated in today's Gospel reading in which we find Jesus attending a dinner party hosted by Simon the Pharisee. The action takes place in the middle of Jesus' Galilean ministry. He's been gaining quite a reputation as a teacher and healer, and people are openly wondering if he might be the Messiah. And at this point, he's also had a few clashes with the Pharisees. They are that group of highly legalistic Jews who believe so strongly in strict obedience to the laws of Moses that they have built up a complicated system of regulations that act as a hedge around the law. They believe that by scrupulously observing these regulations they are achieving true, God-pleasing holiness of life. But now along comes Jesus, whom they admit is an impressive teacher in his own right and a performer of mighty miracles; but they don't understand why he has no use for their fine traditions and rules. If he were a true man of God, they reason, he'd be one of us. But instead he has openly criticized them. And on several occasions he's done things specifically designed to offend them. For instance, he's known to have shared meals with tax collectors and sinners – something no self-respecting Pharisee would ever do. And he's violated their rules by performing miracles of healing on the Sabbath Day. This strikes them as an insult to them and to God's Law. So Jesus is a riddle they can't quite solve.

And so Simon has been working on getting Jesus to come to dinner at his house for some time. It was very common in that day to invite the Rabbi who preached at the Synagogue over to the house for a Sabbath meal and for some deeper theological discussion around the table. The Pharisees actually consider it an honor if the Rabbi accepts the invitation to come to their home. They imagine it's a way for them to earn some more credits with the Lord. That was part of the reason for the invitations made to Jesus in the past by Simon (which had been previously declined). But it seems that the overriding concern of Simon and his other Pharisee guests is to get to the bottom of the mystery of this strange man, Jesus. And it appears, considering Simon's failure to observe what were then some very basic rules of hospitality (like providing water for foot washing) that he and his friends have already pretty well made up their minds about Jesus. They are merely looking for an opportunity to discredit him.

That opportunity seems to have been sent from heaven when a woman with a soiled reputation shows up at the dinner party. Her immoral lifestyle is well known throughout the city. The Pharisees consider her as "unclean" as someone with leprosy. And you need to visualize the scene here. The table is very low; and rather than sitting on chairs, the guests around the table are lying on their sides on mats, with their heads toward the table and their feet pointing away from it. They are lying there eating and engaging in animated conversation. They're asking Jesus questions, and getting surprisingly wise and thought provoking answers.

Now the woman enters. A hush falls on Jesus' dinner companions. "Who let *her* in here? No matter, this might be good. Let's see what Jesus does now." But Jesus ignores her. He keeps on talking and dining as before. The Pharisees are baffled by his behavior.

But what about this woman? What do we know about her? Apart from the fact that she has lived a sinful life, we know that she has been looking high and low for Jesus. The reason for that is clear: somewhere along the line she has heard him teach. He confronted her sinful ways and called her to repentance. And then she heard him assure her of the great mercy and forgiveness that God offers freely to those who repent of their sins and trust in him. She found salvation in Jesus, and for her it was the most important thing in her life. With his words of forgiveness, he changed her—he healed her soul.

She knew that this salvation she received from him was a free gift, and that she didn't have to do anything to earn it – and yet, deep within her heart, she found that she *wanted* to

express her love for the Lord. So she went out and purchased an alabaster vial of oil scented with myrrh. It cost a fortune, but to her it seemed a hopelessly inadequate way to show her appreciation. And then she'd gone looking for Jesus to thank him for all he had done. When she was told that he was at the home of Simon the Pharisee, she was frightened. The Pharisees were good and holy men whose very presence made you feel small and dirty by comparison – and now Jesus was with *them*. She stood before Simon's lavish home. She felt so wrong to be here, she knew she had no right to go in; and yet she was compelled to go forward. It took all the courage she could muster to knock at the gate. The servant who answered stared incredulously at her thinking, "What's a filthy woman like this doing at the home of my master?" When she said, "I must see Jesus now," he was so surprised that he just stepped aside.

She comes up behind Jesus while all the others at the table give her icy glares of condemnation. She had rehearsed what she was going to say over and over again; but now that she's here, now that she sees Jesus, the words won't come. Instead she quietly kneels at his feet and begins to weep. Great tears of sorrow for a life of shame and disgrace flow freely, mingled with tears of joy that she has found the love and forgiveness of God in Jesus.

The glares of the diners change to looks of absolute horror as she now begins to wash his feet with her tears and hair. If she had been a decent woman, it would have been the most disgusting and degrading display of devotion they could have ever imagined. In their minds, no self-respecting person could ever do such a thing: clean someone's feet with their hair. But add the fact that she is an unclean sinner ... "Ugh! How can he allow her touch him like that? Doesn't he know what she is? Where she's been? What she's done? Some prophet he turned out to be. And he lies there carrying on as if he's completely oblivious to her and her sin."

And, of course, this is the irony of the story: not only does Jesus know more about her and her past – and also about her *present* state of mind and heart – than they will ever know, he is so great a prophet that he knows all of their hearts and minds as well. He knows their self-righteous smugness and pride. He knows their blindness to their own faults—their inability to see their lack of love and mercy. And so now, what they thought was the perfect ambush for this would-be Messiah turns out to be the perfect object lesson to confront them with their sin.

"Simon, I have something to say to you." This brings him out of his shocked silence. The original language of the text captures Simon's response better: it's sort of like, "Oh, do say on, teacher, I'm all ears." It drips with sarcasm. Jesus continues patiently, "Two men owed money to a certain lender. One owed five hundred denari, the other fifty. Neither had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Which of them will love him more?"

"This is too easy", thinks Simon, "Not only is he not a prophet, but he asks dumb questions. Still, I'll play along; should be worth a laugh later." "I suppose it would be the guy who had the greater debt cancelled."

And now the trap he'd intended for Jesus slams shut on poor Simon; like David, he's condemned himself by his own words. "You're right on the mark, Simon. And now I want you to consider this woman and apply what you have just said to her." And then with three points of stark contrast, Jesus compares the paltry, even deceitful, hospitality of Simon with the overflowing love expressed by the woman kneeling at his feet. Each point is like a hammer blow against Simon's hard heart. Each point proves that the woman (whom he looks down on) is embraced by God's grace and forgiveness. It's shown very clearly in the love she displays. The unspoken accusation is equally clear: "Your lack of love, Simon, is proof that you do not

know God's grace or live in his forgiveness." This is a revelation to Simon: he'd been completely blind to these sins in his life.

Jesus takes this opportunity to reassure the thankful woman that her sins have been forgiven—not *because* of what she has just done, but rather that the great love she displays is evidence of what has been done in her heart by God. And this is an important Christian principle: the love we show in our lives is in direct proportion to our understanding and appreciation of how much God has forgiven us. This understanding comes about when our sins are brought to the surface and exposed. Some are already clearly visible, like the sins of the woman; but because we are sinners, we often don't dig as deeply as we should to find the rest of them. Like David, we cover them up and think maybe God won't notice. Or, like Simon and the other Pharisees, we can be completely blind to our sins. That's why Christian confrontation, the intervention of caring brothers and sisters to speak God's truth in love in order to expose our sins, is so essential to our growth in Christ. It's what makes us seek God's forgiveness so that, receiving it, we'll be changed and enabled to truly show love in our lives.

This is central to my calling as a pastor. Week after week in my sermon message, it's my job is to confront you with God's Law and to show you the various ways you may have violated it. I don't do this to be mean or judgmental; I do it so that you will see your sin and your need to repent—precisely so that you will desire the forgiveness of God Jesus attained for you by his death on the cross, and receiving it, go forth from here forgiven, changed, and empowered to love others.

And with this in mind, I have something to say to you. I'd like to point out a sin that we are all guilty of: namely the sin of *not confronting* sin in the lives of people around us. We all know people who claim to be Christian and who are playing fast and loose with the law of God. We falsely imagine that it's a loving thing to do to let it go or look the other way. It's not. That's the world's false idea of love. It's a cheap, deceitful imitation of the real thing. Or we may excuse ourselves with the myth that it is none of our business—which is rather like passing by your neighbor's house late at night, seeing smoke pouring out from the windows, and saying to yourself, "I'd better not wake them up. It's none of my business."

The love of Christ makes your neighbor's welfare your business; and if we don't see that, it's because we don't have real love for our neighbor ... as did the prophet Nathan and the Lord Jesus, who in love confronted others with their sin, exposed their faults, and pointed them to the forgiveness that God gives in Christ Jesus. For this lack of love – for our failure to be confrontational Christians – we need to repent; because what we need is love—real love—which God gives us freely when we go to him confessing our sins and trusting in his mercy through his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. In this way may our gracious God enable us truly to love another now and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!