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Meditation

John 13: 31-35

May 6, 2007

A few years ago, the hottest advertising campaign elevated the age-old practice of bumming a beer from a friend to an art form. You probably remember those ads. One of them had about 4 guys sitting around a camp fire, “bonding” over their experience – a fishing trip, I think the setting was. One guy comes and sits real close to one of his friends, throws an arm around him and says in a choked-up voice, “I love you, man!” But instead of being touched, his friend sees right through the flood of fake emotion. “That’s great,” he says, “but you still aren’t getting my Bud Lite.” A pitifully transparent ploy to get the last beer from a buddy.

A confession of love as a way to get a free beer – that’s the ad world’s pitch. And while this may seem ludicrous to us, this ad campaign struck a funny bone with the public and stayed in our consciousness – even to this day, as evidenced by my beginning this sermon recalling one of the ads!

“I love you, man!” Of course, this is an over exaggeration of men being told over recent decades that my half of the species needs to be more sensitive, to show our emotions more, and show our love. “So,” this ad campaign counters, “I’ll bawl, spill my guts and express my love for my friends – so long as it gets me something, like a free beer.” Quite a perspective of love.

Have you noticed how the media describes Christians today, as if all of us walked in lock-step formation? For the most part, images of Christians today are rarely of someone declaring with great sincerity, “I love you, man!” Rather, the most prevalent images are of self-righteous souls proclaiming, “I judge you, man!” or “I condemn you, man!” If you don’t know what I’m talking about, consider the statement the Reverend Jerry Falwell gave, affirmed by Pat Robertson, after the 9/11 attacks:

“I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say ‘you helped this happen.’”

An extreme example, to be sure, but it gets at the way so many Christians understand and live their faith. What’s most important is that we itemize everything we do and

believe, especially others faults and sins. It's a "toe-the-line" faith, to make sure you believe the right way - or else.

How tragically different is that vision from the one presented by Jesus in today's Gospel reading. Instead of being defined by love, as Jesus calls his disciples and us, today so much of Christianity is defined by right thinking, right believing and right acting – all according to someone else's view. To my deep chagrin, Christians, to those inside the Church but especially, to those outside the Church, have become known as a rigid, exclusivist, "one way and one way only" religion. And if you aren't believing this way, doing it this way, then you are history – now and for eternity.

One of the great decisions of the Church in our country today, is whether we will be a rigid, exclusivist club based on correct belief, or a grace-based community of love. Will we be defined by the media and those outside the Church – those people who are yearning for connection with a God of love and truth and Mystery – as a people who have to believe certain things to be right with God and life? Or will the Church be a living, breathing, healing, compassionate community of love and justice and peace? And if we are such a community, how do we share this good news with those who have stopped up their ears because all they've been hearing is a message of condemnation and judgment?

About ten years ago, a 40 year-old fire fighter in Maryland got in trouble and was arrested. It's a story quite similar to what happened to the woman in Tampa, Florida last week when she was arrested while trying to get to her father who was having a heart attack. This story happened this way: on a Monday morning, the man checked his sick daughter's temperature and found that it had climbed to almost 105 degrees. The man called the doctor's office, left a message that he was bringing his daughter in for an emergency visit and rushed off in the car.

A Baltimore Country police officer clocked him driving 50 mph in a 25 mph zone and saw him running a stop sign. When the officer's squad car lights began to flash, the man kept going until he got to the doctor's office. "She was vomiting and choking on it," the man said, "and all I was thinking was that I had to get her to a doctor."

A police spokesman said that the man then refused to show his license and registration outside the doctor's office, taking his daughter inside instead. Accused of resisting arrest, the man was escorted from the doctor's office to the parking lot, where he gave the officer his license and registration. He then returned to the doctor's office to comfort his daughter and was arrested.

That's love. Yes, he broke the law, but he did what he did out of the deeper call of love – and that is the Way of Jesus, the Way we are called to follow. Sometimes, if we want to be followers of Jesus, we have no choice in the matter; we are called, first and foremost, to love.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus calls us to love one another. Why? Because "by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples."

I know that this is really hard today, when the world is told by so many Christians, that what makes a person a Christian is what you believe, not whether you really love, that it is what particular stands you take on selected social issues, and not whether you

show compassion, do justice and speak for those without a voice. But the One we follow said long ago and says again today: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Not in my syrupy, sentimental way, crying in your beer – or crying trying to get a free beer. That, in the words of a seminary professor of mine, is "sloppy agape." The love of which Jesus spoke and lived was down and dirty work; it was action; it was laying down one's life for another, the love to which he still calls us to live. Like the following.

During the war in Sarajevo, a reporter was covering the conflict in the middle of the city and he saw a little girl shot by a sniper. The reporter threw down his pad and pencil, and stopped being a reporter for a few minutes. He rushed to the man who was holding the child, and helped them both into his car.

As the reporter stepped on the accelerator, racing to the hospital, the man holding the bleeding child said, "Hurry, my friend, my child is still alive."

A moment or two later, "Hurry, my friend, my child is still breathing."

A moment later, "Hurry, my friend, my child is still warm."

Finally, "Hurry. Oh, God, my child is getting cold."

When they got to the hospital, the little girl was dead. As the two men were in the lavatory, washing the blood off their hands and clothes, the man turned to the reporter and said, "This is a terrible task for me. I must go tell her father that his child is dead. He will be heartbroken."

The reporter was amazed. He looked at the grieving man and said, "I thought she was your child."

The man looked back and said, "No, but aren't they all our children?"

That is love, because it is true - they are all our children. They are also God's children, all of them, and the love command of Jesus is the call that God has entrusted us to care for them all – in Sarajevo and Baghdad and Kabul, in Hartford and West Hartford, in every place. "By this, the world will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another."

I want to close by playing you a song. It's a song written and recorded by Neal Paul Stookey, of Peter, Paul and Mary, fame. The song is called, "For the Love of It All." Paul is joined in the lead vocals by Susan Werner.

"For the Love of It All"

From the CD, "P, P & M: LifeLines"

1995.

May we follow in his Way, for the love of it all.