

Love Opens to the Spirit

Acts 11: 1-18

John 13: 27-35

There's an often-told story about two men who were seriously ill and confined to a hospital room together. Each had a bed, a closet, and a bedside table, and the room had a bathroom, a door and a window. The man with the bed by the window was allowed to sit up each day, something to do with allowing his lungs to drain, while the other man was required to remain lying down. Both were kept quite still and restricted in what they could do. Actually, all they could really do was talk to each other. They would talk about all kinds of things to pass the time. One of the things the man sitting up by the window would do is describe what he was seeing outside. The other man longed for these times when he could feel connected to life on the outside, feel human and whole, and his roommate by the window obliged him.

The man by the window would chatter in great detail to his mate about things in the park across the way where there was a lake with ducks and swans, children feeding them bread and sailing model boats. Young lovers walked hand-in-hand under the trees, children rode their bicycles and babies kicked in strollers. He told about the beautiful colors in the flowers, the softball games, people snoozing on the benches, and even the parks worker collecting garbage. The man on his back thoroughly enjoyed all of this, how a child nearly fell in the lake, how beautiful the girls were in their summer dresses, how exciting the football game was, and how a boy and his puppy ran and frolicked with complete abandon.

One day, as the man by the window was describing the procession of a parade, the man on his back began to think, 'Why should that man next to the window get to see everything. Why can't I have a chance to see, too?' He knew he was being petty, but the feeling that he was being cheated wouldn't go away. In fact, it deepened into a brooding, dark obsession. That can happen when a person is isolated and limited. He'd do anything to change his circumstances. Anything.

Then one night, the man by the window had a fit of coughing and choking as fluid congested his lungs. He groped for the call button to bring the nurse, but he couldn't locate it amid his desperate spasms. The roommate on his back simply watched without moving. The coughing and gasping continued until finally it stopped and became quiet. An hour later, the nurse checked in and found the man by the window had died.

Early in the morning, the body was removed. When the nurse returned later, he asked if he might be moved ... over by the window. Sure, so they switched him over. As soon as the nurses left, the man propped himself up weakly on one elbow and with great effort looked out the window. The window ... faced a brick wall.

This man who had been without the window thought that he could possess what the other had simply by taking that place. He didn't realize, until it was too late, that his healing and his peace – his re-connection to life in the world – came through another *person*, not a *thing* like a mere window. The window itself was nothing. Or by a position

or place, as in being *by* the window. Or in the ability to do something, like *see outside* the window. It was more than himself; his companion had made him whole.

And consider the grace and compassion of the man by the window. Staring at a brick wall, he found his own thirst for life was given drink by *his roommate* who clearly needed *his* vision, *his* creativity and *his* caring, illustrating a world from his generously vivid imagination. He was blessed in this, too. They needed one another. They required the fellowship of their shared, but different circumstances. What transcended their circumstances was a passion for the blessings of life. That's how the reach of God's loving promise of life overcomes worldly obstacles, finds God's purposes, and the promise gets fulfilled.

In the reading from the book of Acts, we're at the concluding section of a long story involving the apostle Peter and his peculiar vision which gets recounted again in this reading. In his vision, Peter is commanded to eat all kinds of foods by a heavenly voice. Peter protests because there are many foods forbidden for Jews. If such foods were consumed, it would be sinful, contrary to God's law, making a person unclean and impure. Yet Peter's vision was authorizing a disregard of the whole dietary law of Judaism.

In our passage, Peter is relating this vision to church leaders in Jerusalem who are aghast by what Peter is saying about food. Peter continues by telling how he was brought to Caesarea to a Gentile (non-Jew), a centurion named Cornelius, another very inappropriate move. Gentiles have no formal place within Judaism, and at this point, the "Jesus followers" consider themselves to be fully Jewish – Jews for whom Jesus is messiah.

Peter then tells the church leaders how he began to preach to the Gentiles, how he discovered that worldly obstacles were being overcome, transcended as God's will and purpose advanced with new people, strange people, people who have never been included in God's covenant in any way ever before. To seal this stunning new direction, the presence of the Holy Spirit becomes evident among the newly believing Gentiles. Peter baptizes them.

As Peter recounts this, the Jewish brothers in the Jesus sect are understandably upset. Peter has flagrantly disregarded the Torah-Law. Peter describes how when the Spirit came upon the Gentiles, he understood that God's will was being achieved – most surprisingly – through these strangers. God was going to work through them regardless and Peter had no choice but to comply.

Blessedly at this point, the Jerusalem doubters dropped their objections to Peter's work ... well, for the time being anyway. Some realized that God would work with new people in their midst to reveal his will and advance his kingdom in all of them, Jews and Gentile strangers together. Did Jesus forget to tell them about this? Does someone have the manual?

Peter didn't expect that God could work through these strangers, yet that was exactly what God would do. We also may wonder how erstwhile strangers might bring us any benefit. Thinking in our own narrow terms about ourselves and about others, noting only differences and what's presently unknown about them, we may deny that any good could come from this. Yet isn't God's routine tactic to use others to grow us further and empower us more fully? Do you imagine that your growth in faith and spirit has come in some personal vacuum? Can't we imagine that working and sharing together with others, even strangers, can provide conduits for the work of the Holy Spirit?

In encounters with unknown others, an opening is created for us where things unseen and unknown are given life. Through the gift of others with whom we share this amazing life journey, we're awakened to new things, as even old things are given new life, and while new vistas are painted, placing within us a new sense of connection, strength, and spiritual awareness. We find ourselves transcending obstacles of self and the strangeness of others. The Holy Spirit leaps into the opening to infuse each life with new gifts of discernment and direction in the Lord's way.

Preceding the work of the Spirit, whether in Peter or in us, the presence of critical element is required. Two thresholds of love must be crossed that will open things up and let the Spirit in.

One is the love of Jesus, the love that is like Jesus' love, the love that cares as much or more about the other as for oneself. This love like Jesus is able to transcend our doubts, fears, and anxieties. Those are the things that keep us closed, secure, static, and unchanged.

Doubts, fears, and anxieties keep us and everything around us closed up, sealed airtight, blocking the light, deaf to the sounds, ignoring or rejecting the uncommon and unknown. Only the self-giving love like Jesus, the love which makes all things secondary, opens us to God's promise, opens to the work of the Spirit.

The other threshold of love is the love of the other. This is similar, but it means taking that love like Jesus and now applying it, fulfilling it. That love of Jesus is a nice idea, a genuinely heartfelt commitment, but you come upon a whole new threshold in actually applying it in real life. (St.) Francis of Assisi knew he was unable to love like Jesus because of his loathing of lepers. For Francis, lepers were not only loathsome and diseased, but he was also utterly terrified of them. This was the result of highly effective social taboos towards lepers who had to ring a bell around their necks to sound an alarm to any who might cross their path. It wasn't until Francis overcame all of what held him back, really actualizing love like Jesus, that he was able to truly affirm his faith and devotion to the Lord. He would do this by hugging and kissing the lepers.

There is a similar story that 20th century founder of the Catholic Social Worker Dorothy Day tells about loving those whom you personally find unlovable.

Jean Vanier, another contemporary saint who founded the L'Arche communities for people with mental and physical disabilities, shares stories of how he had great

struggles to learn to love like Jesus in ministering to the very difficult special needs residents of L'Arche. To love like Jesus is to love like no other, and we should all be able to confront the real limits we have placed on the love which we bear.

In the reading from John, we join Jesus and his disciples on the night of the last supper, when Jesus washed his disciples' feet to model for them the true nature of servant ministry.

His words reveal his betrayer, the disciple who refused to serve Jesus or follow his way. Whatever Judas's purposes, they were to suit himself alone and he had shut the door to Jesus and his way. Betrayal, perhaps the most painful act, turning love and trust into a weapon to damage and even destroy, stands in stark contrast to what Jesus says next.

Jesus gives his remaining disciples a new command, "Love one another." He suggests that they recall his ministry and model him again; "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" – that's love like Jesus. Jesus anticipates his imminent arrest and likely his execution. When he departs from his disciples, Jesus does not want the opening, the open window to God's kingdom to become for his disciples like staring into a brick wall. He wants that window to continue to enliven and enrich them with new vistas and challenges to growth and maturity. Jesus' own place will be among them when love like Jesus is present among them. Where love is, the promise of the Lord and the Kingdom of God is wide open to let the Spirit enter and transform and fulfill Jesus' mission.

As members of the contemporary body of Christ, we bring form and substance to the love command of the Lord. We establish our identity in his love and compassion, and we incarnate his very presence among us in the Holy Spirit. The same opening to the Gentiles to enter into the power and blessing of the Lord becomes the opening for us so that we might minister with love like Jesus that provides an opening to the Spirit in our sharing with others.

May we discover what God is yet doing with us as we seek to love like Jesus. May we seek to create an opening for the Spirit to bring new form and meaning to our discipleship by revealing God's promise and purpose, both for others as well as ourselves.