

## 27A 2023

Sitting on the Mount of Olives surrounded by his disciples, Jesus explains to them what is necessary in order to approach the kingdom of heaven, in other words, he tells them what kind of person truly understands the nature of love.

This passage reminds me of an animated discussion we had in spiritual formation last Wednesday.

We talked about various ways people understand the word “love.”

We may think that it is all about being nice to people.

Real love actually requires great responsibility, which means *the ability to respond* to others, a quality only half of the bridesmaids share.

Real love requires that we sometimes set aside our egos and do things that are not entertaining.

As I always say, you find out who your friends are when you move.

There are people who will be right there with you when it is fun, but disappear as soon as there is a challenge.

Richard Rohr calls this pleasure seeking behavior “hippie love.”

He points out that we went through a cultural period of being told that love is the answer, love is all there is, but for some reason, it did not produce the kind of results one might hope.

There was an earnest hope for peace and love that one can see in Scott McKenzie's gentle face as he sings his famous song, "San Francisco," but it was assumed to be an easy won peace.

Though well intentioned, it was an attempt to create a world of light only.

It ignored the ubiquity, in fact, the necessity of darkness and was actually selfish in practice and therefore does not work.

If I am only committed as long as I am getting everything that I want, then I do not love you.

I am simply using you.

Remember love ins?

Compare that with a barn raising, where the whole neighborhood got together and built a barn so that neighbors could survive.

In contrast, there was no depth of love in a love in.

People were sold on the illusion that everyone could get everything he or she wants, but if I seek to get everything that I want and you seek to get everything that you want and everyone just smiles at each other (well, I guess they were doing more than smiling at love ins), that ends in loneliness, not love, because conflicts will arise, and there is nothing lonelier than facing difficulties by oneself.

Love is about actually being there for people when life happens.

My grandfather's first cousin had no children, so, as she aged, my parents responded to calls in the wee hours of the morning when something went wrong.

Her niece seemed to think they were doing it in order to get in good with her and inherit her property.

Coming from the perspective of the foolish bridesmaids who think selfishly, she was unable to understand that my parents had no interest in that.

Similarly, my grandmother had a small house, about 700 square feet, but repeatedly took in relatives who had nowhere to go and helped them to re-establish themselves.

That is love with depth.

Real love is not easy and it entails a willingness to set aside our egos at appropriate times, which is the opposite of a love that assumes we can have it all easily.

Love requires dutiful preparation, as Jesus tells his disciples.

The wise bridesmaids were responsible.

They made sure that they had enough oil to last until the bridegroom came.

They could have used the wait time to have party, but instead, they were preparing diligently.

The bridesmaids who had not prepared, on the other hand, wanted to take from those who had.

They were selfish throughout and therefore far from the kingdom of heaven.

It is ironic that we think that being selfish will guarantee us more, because in the end, we have no control over when the stock market crashes, when we develop an illness, when a fire destroys our home, and we find ourselves in the position of needing others, perhaps not financially, but emotionally, spiritually.

What is this responsible preparation that Jesus is teaching his disciples?

It means taking this opportunity of life on earth seriously.

Sadly, we have a culture that teaches us that success means being happy all the time.

Thinking that we should be happy all the time makes us miserable.

When life happens, we feel like failures when we are actually just people going through what people go through.

Think about it.

We are *required* to smile in photos.

People carefully pose and curate family Christmas photos for personalized cards so that they look like the perfect family even though the reality is necessarily very different.

There is no perfect family.

People in the early days of photography did not smile.

I imagine they saw no reason to smile into an inhuman apparatus, so they stared expressionless into the camera.

Occasionally, there would be a candid photo that caught someone in the act of smiling, but, when I look back through my own family photos, compulsory smiling arrived with postwar consumerism.

Capitalism was going to make everyone happy and so you better look like you were happy or you were undermining progress.

I remember having to *practice* smiling before elementary school photos.

We were to be happy all the time, and the way to be happy was to shop.

By the seventies, I kept hearing the expression, “Look out for numero uno.”

We became more and more isolated.

The Christian message no longer makes sense to people who believe that life can and should be endless happiness.

Now we have come to a point where we are so self-involved, so lacking in humility, that we think that our opinions no longer need grounding in reality.

My utterly baseless opinions that spring from pure emotion are supposedly just as “valid” as another’s well-considered opinions based on facts.

We just believe whatever makes us comfortable.

What is lacking?

The traditional terms for it are repentance and conversion of life.

The word “repentance” leaves a bad taste in some people’s mouths because they have heard it misused by people preaching guilt, by people telling us that we must accept that we are evil in order for God to welcome us into heaven after we die.

Jesus, on the other hand, describes the kingdom of heaven as something available in the here and now.

By postponing it to some eschatological future, we manage to de-emphasize the necessary change of heart in favor of obedience to rules, which are, quite frankly, easier than actually caring.

We can sit smug in our own righteousness because we did not murder anyone yesterday.

This is, however, not repentance as we see it.

It is not the repentance that we find in the New Testament where it means thinking anew, accepting that we all have darkness and light in us, accepting that we cannot always have everything we want, accepting that life is necessarily full of conflicts and challenges.

Once we come to terms with the darkness and light in ourselves, we more readily identify with and connect with others, who have the same humanly struggle.

We are more likely to want to support one another.

This is what happens in AA and NA.

People start to see themselves in others and others in themselves.

They start to support one another, and that is when the healing begins.

Those who deny that they have any darkness in them, who work hard to cover it up and maintain a facade of superiority, on the other hand, look down on others rather than supporting them.

We convince ourselves that our brothers and sisters in Christ actually are not like us, so we do not need to care, to be responsible.

Thinking anew naturally leads to conversion of life, to putting aside our egos when appropriate and letting go of our vain attempts to look superior.

We become able truly to accept ourselves, to be with others, to love our neighbors.

Church is not about becoming perfect.

It is where real people filled with light and dark meet other real people filled with light and dark and do beautiful things together.

This is how we responsibly prepare ourselves and grow close to the kingdom of heaven.