

St. Lukes
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Jim Martin

As you'll see in the leaflet... apparently I made the mistake of expressing attraction to today's readings when I saw them earlier this week. So, let me explain.

I find this reading from Paul's letter to the Romans to be absolutely astounding. Let me read again just the first verse:

*8 Owe no one anything, except to **love** one another; for the one who **loves** another has fulfilled the law.*

If you know some of Paul's history, then you know that he didn't start out preaching a message of *love*. This is all part of the radically transforming work that Jesus began in him on the Damascus road. And Paul himself, partly through these very words, would contribute to Jesus' message of love becoming central among believers.

How did we get here? Let me share some sense of how I understand this history.

Lately, I've been reading a lot about the Desert Dwellers, sometimes called the Desert Mothers and Fathers. These third through sixth century Christians moved out into the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and The Arabian Peninsula in search of a simplified, uncluttered life that they could live entirely devoted to God.

This movement really began to gain momentum once the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and made it the state religion of the Roman Empire. On the face of it, this might sound like a good thing, but many contemporary followers of Jesus didn't experience it that way.

One of the reasons for this is that very early Christianity was thriving under persecution.

We have this recorded for us in the book of Acts. It's a bumpy ride from the jump, but the church grows by leaps and bounds first catching the eye of jealous religious and political leaders, then catching their anger, and finally their violence. Following the stoning of Stephen in Acts chapter 7—which happens at the feet of a young man named **Saul**—Acts chapter 8 describes the diaspora of believers essentially running for their lives across the Judean countryside with only the Apostles staying in Jerusalem.

By chapter 9 of Acts, not satisfied with the murder of Stephen, this young man named **Saul** is described as “breathing out threats and murder” as he obtains permission from the religious leaders to from house to house dragging off men and women who professed faith in this Jesus and throwing them in prison.

And still the young church thrives. Very quickly, it grows from a **rural** movement following Jesus in Galilee, to an **urban** movement of believers gathered around the disciples in Jerusalem, to a **cosmopolitan** movement in centers of world trade like Antioch.

So far, the chief nemesis of this movement appears to be this young man named **Saul**.

Fast forward to the year 311 and the Roman Emperor Constantine converts to Christianity. In 313 Constantine makes Christianity the official religion of the Empire and things change significantly. Christianity suddenly has legal standing, and far from being persecuted, Christians now enjoy a kind of status and security granted by the world. Being a disciple of Jesus, at last, becomes quite comfortable.

So, while this may seem like a huge “win” for the people following Jesus. Not everyone saw it that way. Some Christians longed for a deeper, more spiritual experience than state-sponsored religion—which in their experience had become a tame, watered-down version of what had been preached by Jesus—and by Paul.

And so, communities formed outside of the cities of the Holy Roman Empire from Turkey through the Arabian Peninsula, and Northern Africa. These were communities of everyday Christians seeking a more living and contemplative form of the faith. They devoted time to silence, solitude, reflection, prayer, contemplation.

They were deeply committed to rooting out everything that might possibly hinder their pursuit of their faith. Sometimes these practices got a little excessive—going without sleep or food for long periods. Rejecting all forms of human comfort. But for the most part these were deeply earnest disciples seeking to be faithful to Jesus.

Because of some of their ascetic excesses—some of their wide-ranging practices of abstinence, we might expect them to be a dour, severe, grim, and judgmental set.

But what might surprise you to hear about these early monastics, is that they were *all about love*. They took Jesus seriously when he said that the entire law and prophets were summed up in the twin commands to love God and to love neighbor. Anything that hindered them from loving God, anything that hindered them from loving their neighbor, these things were to be noticed, contemplated, examined, and with God’s help eliminated so that they would be free to love, and free of the judgment of others.

In today’s epistle reading, we encounter this young man named Saul later in his life. His early life had been all about the destruction of the church and anyone who believed in Jesus. But by the time we meet him again as the author of the book of Romans, he’s been remarkably, miraculously transformed. In fact, he’s been given a new name: Paul. He’s no longer

breathing out threats and murder against the church. Of all things, he's talking about *love*.

This is the Apostle Paul writing later in his life. We have it preserved in Romans 13. Again,

*8 Owe no one anything, except to **love** one another; for the one who **loves** another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "**Love** your neighbor as yourself." 10 **Love** does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, **love** is the fulfilling of the law.*

What has happened to this enemy of the early Church that has so profoundly transformed him? It is, in fact, Paul's *own* experience of *love* that has been so transformational. Paul is sought out first by Jesus himself in Acts 9, and this brutal enemy is brought into the Kingdom of God's love. This is Jesus *practicing what he's been preaching* in today's Gospel reading. Jesus says, if someone "sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." With Paul, Jesus does this in spectacular fashion!

Jesus goes on to say that if the person refuses to listen, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." And we need only to ask how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors... he *loved* them. He *pursued* them. He *loves* them. He *pursues* them.

So, Paul has this remarkable "come to Jesus" moment that changes the course of his whole life. He seems to immediately pack himself off to the Arabian Peninsula to spend some time with Jesus in the desert—much like the Desert Mothers and Fathers will do later. He returns to Damascus and starts preaching in the synagogues about Jesus. Then he heads to Jerusalem to connect with the other Apostles in Jerusalem, in a sense to

“join the movement,” but they are, understandably, all afraid of him! They basically pack him off back to his hometown of Tarsus.

But there’s that teaching of Jesus... when someone sins against you, treat them as you would a gentile or tax collector... Pursue them.

Perhaps this is why in Acts chapter 11 Barnabas also goes after Paul. Barnabas walks the 100 miles from Antioch to Tarsus to enlist Paul’s help in leading the burgeoning movement in Antioch. This act of love and trust must have been another transforming experience for Saul/Paul. It becomes the real beginning point of who we know Paul to be in history.

So, it turns out, Paul *knows* about the power of love because he’s experienced it in the most profound of ways. It has changed his whole identity and life direction. He is no longer the murderous enemy, but the beloved friend. He has been transformed from hater to lover. From antagonist to Apostle.

Who we understand ourselves to be, *the idea of our identity* is profoundly important. I see this clearly in the passage from Exodus today. The Israelites after a long and traumatic series of events at the hands of an indecisive and neurotic Pharaoh are at the end of their ropes. (One of my favorite authors, Dallas Willard famously says, “If you want God’s address, I can give it to you. It’s at the end of your rope.”)

It’s here that the Israelites receive specific instructions about the Passover. A special meal of lamb is to be prepared and eaten in haste. The blood of the lamb (a phrase that’s been embedded in history and Scripture ever since), the blood of the lamb is to be spread on the doorposts and the header of every door of those who belonged to God. The blood, of course, was a sign indicating the identity of those within the house.

Now, you might think that the purpose of the blood was so that when the Lord passed through Egypt, he would not get confused about who was who in the various houses. But here's what the text says:

Exodus 12:13

*The blood shall be a sign **for you**, and no plague shall destroy you..."*

The sign was for the Israelites! For the people rather than for God. And upon reflection, of course, this makes sense. God always knows who is who. *WE* are the ones who get confused.

So, let's reflect on our own identities. Who *are* we, *primarily*? Are we members of St. Lukes? Are we Vermonters? Are we Democrats or Republicans? Are we U.S. Citizens? These are all secondary identities, and by comparison far, far less important.

Who are we primarily? We are the beloved children of our infinitely loving God.

What would it change for us if we could begin each day living out of this identity rather than some other?

Jesus is in the business of turning enemies into friends. Of issuing new identities that transform us from Sauls to Pauls, outsiders to insiders, from sinners to saints, from haters to lovers.

Paul knew this from experience. His earnest call to us is that we:

Romans 13:8 *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

- Because we are first loved by Jesus (as the apostle John will say elsewhere),
- Because love fulfills the entire law,

- Because there are still enemies who desperately need to be loved

Our ascetic proto-monastic ancestors in the desert knew this. The secret to this whole life in Christ is about love. Loving God and loving one another.

So, like them, let's follow Paul's example. Let's owe no one anything, except to love one another.

Amen.