

“Love and Acting on Love” by David Novello

November 23, 2014

Feast of the Reign of Christ

Three weeks ago [Jackie Wallen preached about the thin places](#), where we find ourselves closer to God. I've loved that image since I first heard it a few years ago. We all have our thin places and *thick* places too. I said in mission group a while back that things *really* thicken up for me in this Sanctuary when we stand to sing a hymn. If I thought I had any real chance of success, I'd petition Celebration Circle to cut back the number of hymns to one or two per service or, best of all, none. I'd much rather extend the time of our periods of silence because for me it is often in the silence that everything thins out.

Or perhaps include more instrumental music of the non-hymn variety. I imagine my dislike stems in part from the fact that I don't sing well, but I'm quite sure it goes beyond that. Having been raised Catholic, I didn't grow up with Protestant hymns so there is no warm feeling from having them part of my life at a young age. And although I like the tunes of some hymns, they're in the minority. I love Gospel music – but to be honest, Gospel as sung by we Seekers doesn't quite do it for me.

Of all Christian hymns, the one I always held a special dislike for is one of the two we have sung this morning – “They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love.” I only learned from Liz a few weeks ago that it is a Catholic hymn. I should have realized that because it was one of the staples at the folkie Mass I went to before I made my escape from the

Catholic Church after my confirmation at 13 years old.

I'll provide some background on my negative feelings for this song. The people in the town where I grew up were, not surprisingly, predominately Christian. But this was northern New Jersey, and my neighborhood was mostly Jewish. At one point, eight of the ten families that lived on my block were Jewish, and the vast majority of my best friends were Jews. The same was true of my mother. She grew up in a Jewish neighborhood too, and after she had enough of the Catholic Church she wore a chai medallion around her neck.

Back to "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love." Following Vatican II, there were both upstairs and downstairs 10:30 Masses at our church. The upstairs Mass reflected the old, stodgy, conservative Church. The downstairs Mass, on the other hand, was the hip place to be, with young, relevant priests who gave homilies about things that actually mattered.

The music there was of the post-Vatican II folk guitar type. It seemed like we sang "They'll Know We Are Christians" every week, and it always drove me nuts. I'm embarrassed to admit this because, in doing so, I am revealing that my interpretation of the lyrics was way off the mark. I read the words to be an assertion that Christians were *more loving* than others – including my Jewish friends – and that Christians were superior in this way. It never occurred to me until I heard the song many years later – in this Sanctuary, in fact – that I had missed the point. Maybe I missed it because it was past time for me to be gone from St. Michael's Church. Or maybe I was just dense. Regardless, I failed to recognize that the lyricist wasn't claiming deep love is exclusively Christian. Instead, of course, the message is that love is central to Jesus and his followers. Maybe a number of people in the upstairs 10:30 Mass would have claimed the love of Christians is deeper than the love of people of other faiths, but I imagine that not many in the downstairs Mass saw things that way. And I think that, all in all, today followers of

Jesus are more likely to honor the outlook of at least some faiths more than they did 50 or 100 years ago.

But what about the relative love of believers and nonbelievers? That brings me to today's Gospel reading, and particularly how it may or may not differ from Jesus's statement, a few chapters earlier in Matthew, that the most important commandment is to love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Jesus's second main commandment, as we know, is to love your neighbor as yourself. But in today's Gospel reading from Matthew – at least as I read it – the emphasis is on loving your fellow beings who are in need. Jesus says we need to love, to feel compassion – and then *to act* to relieve the suffering of others. Only *feeling* the love doesn't cut it. I recently heard a quote that sums up my feelings on the subject well – “Compassion without action is sentimentality, while action without compassion is condescension.” Again, “Compassion without action is sentimentality, while action without compassion is condescension.”

So what about people who feel love and compassion, and who act on those feelings – but who also think any notion or concept of God is a bunch of nonsense? Even a non-personal God. What if you don't believe in the Kingdom, don't see the energy forces underlying the universe as being the least bit spiritual, don't believe in a first cause? How does one who thinks there is no God love God with his or her heart, soul, and mind? And does it matter at all whether a nonbeliever of necessity blows off the first central commandments and sticks with the second? Do they end up with the goats on the left? (And here I'm putting aside the question of why the sheep are on the right and the goats on the left. Not that I know much about either animal, but it seems to me that goats are more likely to act in the world than are sheep.)

When I think about nonbelievers acting compassionately in the world, I think about a good friend who is the *least* spiritual

person I know myself. For him, the idea of God – a personal God or a non-personal God – is ludicrous. Putting aside religion, *any* spirituality is beyond the pale for him. He grew up in a Unitarian church, and he thinks that even whatever spirituality was found there was a bunch of hooey. A Unitarian church! If you divide world outlooks into material vs. spiritual, my friend would at least consider himself to be 100% on the material side of the fence. And yet, even though he doesn't wear his love and compassion on his shirtsleeves, I see his work in the world as springing from those feelings for his fellow human beings. Especially those who are less fortunate. He acts in the world through the political process, although indirectly – he is a demographer at a progressive think tank, and his analytical work involves helping to see how progressive coalitions of voters can be built. That is impersonal work in many ways, but in my view it is still about feeding those who are hungry, etc. Besides that, he is compassionate and loving on the personal level.

Many would say he acts spiritually in the world, even though he would have a fit if anyone applied that word to him. The older I get, the more I think that it's all in how you define words – it's all a matter of words. I believe in God if you define God in certain ways, but don't if you use other definitions. But no matter how you define religious or spiritual, any day of the week I'll take a person who does not believe in any God but feels compassion and love towards other beings – and acts – over a Christian or Jew or Muslim or whatever who loves his or her God and even neighbors but stops there. Any day. I guess you *might* say I'm reversing the relative importance of Jesus' two central commandments.

And yet. And yet I don't think it's really that simple for me. I'll draw on what was probably the most politically engaged episode of my life. It was in my second and third years of law school, after I figured out that there were much better things to do in New York City than sit through awful

law school classes. This was 1981 to 1983, when the U.S. actively supported a generally murderous regime in El Salvador. I became quite involved with the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, or CISPES, which was very left and subject to a good amount of FBI surveillance. The overall coalition opposed to U.S. support for the Salvadoran government in the early 1980s was an interesting one, made up of both secular and religious groups. I became involved not long after the assassination of Archbishop Romero and the execution of four American nuns by right-wing Salvadoran death squads. It is therefore not surprising that a number of Christian groups – primarily Catholic organizations – opposed the Reagan administration's military support of the Salvadoran government.

Then in June 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon. What happened next was very disconcerting to me. Many members of CISPES, and other secular opponents of U.S. policy in El Salvador, jumped ship to protest the Israeli invasion. Putting aside the propriety of Israel's military action, I was stunned that many people who had seemed committed to Salvadoran solidarity work were now nowhere to be seen, off organizing demonstrations against the Israeli invasion. But the Catholic and other religious people and organizations stayed the course. They knew their work was important and they stuck with it.

In Taijiquan, it is critical to maintain a firm root. You "sink the qi" (or energy) to the area a little below the navel – what the Chinese call the lower dantian and the Japanese call the hara – and that helps you to center and root. That way you are well grounded and not knocked off balance by whatever winds blow your way. When I look back 32 years, it seems to me that opponents of U.S. Central American policy who were acting out of some type of faith mostly maintained their root. They stayed centered, knowing the importance of their work, and continued their efforts. While a number of their secular colleagues didn't take off, many did. I think their

center was somewhere high in their bodies. They were uprooted by other events in the world, and their commitment flagged.

So where do I come out on these questions about the basis for acting on our love and compassion for others? In truth, I'm conflicted. I honestly do not know. I don't want to sound wishy-washy, but I think it best for me to keep a "Don't know mind" here, as it is for most things. I believe our actions to serve our fellow beings and this world must come from a deep source, but I'm unclear as to the importance of the *nature* of that source – as long as it is deep. (And I guess one *could* define any deep, vital source as God.) If the love they know us by is a deep and sincere and committed love, flowing through our work in the world, perhaps that is enough.