

## WHAT WOULD HAPPEN?

It was some forty-five to fifty years ago—which would make me between eleven and fifteen years old—that I was at church listening to a sermon. The priest—I was a practicing Roman Catholic back then—the priest began his sermon with what I was to me an intriguing premise. So intriguing, in fact, that I remember it forty-five to fifty years later.

By the way, a preacher for almost thirty years now, it would totally blow my mind if someone remembered something I said in a sermon forty-five to fifty years later! Not that I'd even know it, but even so . . .

Anyway, the priest's statement was, "If we Christians actually lived as we're supposed to live; if we acted the way Jesus taught and called us to act, people would be beating down the doors of our church so they could belong."

Can you imagine that? Crowds of people gathered outside our front door every Sunday morning, just begging to be let in! We would have to start taking reservations to prevent pushing and shoving and arguing about who will be able to attend worship this week! Even the front pews would be filled to capacity!

Talk about miracles!

Why would we have this incredible influx of people wanted to join us here?

Because of the example we were setting by living the way Christians are supposed to live and acting the way Jesus taught and called us to act.

Now, there's a strong argument against that premise, which was brought to my attention some twenty years after that priest's sermon when talking to a pastor acquaintance. I don't remember what we were actually talking about at the time, but at some point in our conversation I said to him what I just said to you.

"If we Christians actually lived as we're supposed to live; if we acted the way Jesus taught and called us to act, people would be beating down the doors of our churches so they could belong."

"Nay, nay," the minister acquaintance said. "If we all lived as we were supposed to live, and we acted the way Jesus taught and called us to act, the people outside the Christian faith community would see people completely dedicated to Christ, living with profound, sacrificial love; sort of like the way it's

described in the second chapter of the book of Acts.

“They [they being the newly formed Christian church] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer . . . All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold [their] property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”

If you and I acted in that manner here in our church, meeting to worship and pray all day every day, always eating our meals together, and best of all, selling everything we had, all of our personal property and possessions—homes, cars, iPhones, big screen TVs and everything else we owned—and giving it all away to the poor, I’m not so sure that would entice very many people to walk through our doors. What it might do is cause a lot of people to think we’re a deranged, perhaps even dangerous cult—an organization not to join, but to avoid at all costs.

All of that leads to the two great commandments Jesus brought up in this morning’s Gospel reading (you were wondering when I was going to get to that subject, weren’t you?).

The religious group known as the Pharisees—who totally loathed Jesus and considered him to be a perpetual thorn in their side—got together to test him, with the ultimate goal of tripping him up and making him look bad in the eyes of the crowds of people who were following him.

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Now, you have to understand, they weren’t just talking about the Ten Commandments. There were 613 laws in the Jewish religion! So they were basically asking Jesus to find an ace of spades in a deck of 613 cards. Perhaps they assumed that Jesus didn’t even know all 613 of those laws.

Those Pharisees were probably thinking to themselves, “We’ve really got you this time, Jesus! No way are you going to come away from our test smelling like a bed of roses! Whatever commandment you decide to pick, we will choose another one that is greater!”

I’d like to think that Jesus didn’t hesitate for one second before giving the Pharisees his answer.

“Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law—the entire list, all 613—and the prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Love God with everything you’ve got, with your entire being. And love your neighbor with the same kind of intensity and caring attention you give to

yourself.

Now, I want to return to the beginning of my sermon, and the memorable—at least to me—declaration the priest who was preaching made in his sermon. “If we Christians actually lived as we’re supposed to live; if we acted the way Jesus taught and called us to act, people would be beating down the doors of our church so they could belong.” If that’s how we’re supposed to live and act, by loving God with all of our heart, soul and mind and love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, and if we actually did that to the very best of our ability, do you think it would attract people to **our church**?

Would people be beating down our doors—in the metaphorical sense, I mean—to be part of such a loving, caring community?

Who knows, really? But what would happen if we did? What do you think the response of those outside our faith community would be?

I came across something recently that illustrates the kind of radical, caring, challenging love for our neighbor I believe Jesus desires from a church, and calls Christian faith communities to practice. It’s the same kind of radical, caring, challenging love Jesus himself practiced. Let me read now from an article evangelist Tony Campolo wrote, entitled, “There’s Always Something to Love.”

“Some years ago, I saw Lorraine Hansberry’s play, *Raisin in the Sun*, and heard a passage that still haunts me.

In the play, an African-American family inherits \$10,000 from their father’s life insurance policy. The mother of the household sees in this legacy the chance to escape the ghetto life of Harlem and move into a little house with flower boxes out in the countryside. The brilliant daughter of this family sees in the money the chance to live out her dream and go to medical school.

“But the older brother has a plea that is difficult to ignore. He begs for the money so he and his “friend” can go into business together. He tells the family that with the money he can make something of himself and make things good for the rest of them. He promises that if he can just have the money, he can give back to the family all the blessings that their hard lives have denied them.

“Against her better judgment, the mother gives in to the pleas of her son. She has to admit that life’s opportunities have never been good for him and that he deserves the chance that this money might give him.

“As you might have suspected, the so-called “friend” skips town with the money. The desolate son has to return home and break the news to the family that their hopes for the future have been stolen and their dreams for a better life are gone. His sister lashes into him with a barrage of ugly slurs. She calls him every despicable thing she can think of. Her contempt for her brother has no limits.

“When she takes a breath from her outburst, the mother interrupts her and says, ‘I thought I taught you to love him.’

“Beneatha, the daughter, replies, ‘Love him? There’s nothing left to love.’

“And the mother says, ‘There’s always something left to love. And if you ain’t learned that, you ain’t learned nothing. Have you cried for that boy today? I don’t mean for yourself and the family because we lost all that money. I mean for him; for what he’s been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most: when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain’t through learning, because that ain’t the time at all. It’s when he’s at his **lowest and** can’t believe in himself ‘cause the world done whipped him so. When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he done come through before he got to wherever he is.’”

Campolo went on to write, “That is grace! It is love that is given when it is not deserved. It is a gift that flows like a refreshing stream to quench the fires of angry, condemning words.

What do you suppose would happen if we—meaning the collective “we,” meaning the Christian church and every Christian in the worldwide church—what do you suppose would happen if we all strove to love like that? To love others when it’s not deserved. You know, the way Jesus himself loved, and what he meant when he declared one of the two greatest commandments to be, “Love your neighbor as yourself”?

Is that the kind of love Jesus was referring to? Love that’s at its strongest when a person is “at his lowest and can’t believe in himself ‘cause the world done whipped him so’? Love that is “given when it is not deserved”?

I believe that’s exactly the kind of love Jesus was talking about, and the kind of love the law to love your neighbor as yourself commands us to do.

What good fruits would our lives and our church produce, if we were to do everything in our power to practice such love for Christ, in Christ’s name? Would people be inspired by the love for neighbor we show and want to be a part of our faith community?

Only God knows the answer to that question, of course. But we know that God’s will is for us to try to do just that, whatever the result would be. And whether or not people end up breaking down the doors of our church—literally or figuratively—to be part of our faith community, one thing I can promise is that they would surely take notice of such a loving, caring faith community. Wouldn’t it be incredible if we, the First Congregational Church of Scarborough became known as that church down on the Black Point Road whose members are

so loving and caring, the way Jesus himself was?

An unknown author wrote the following, very challenging question.

What would happen if we Christians all agreed to read one of the Gospels until we came to a place that told us to do something? Then we stopped there and went out to do it, and only after we had done it begin reading again?

That sounds pretty radical, doesn't it? But I wonder why that is.

We're followers of Jesus, right? Why wouldn't we do what Jesus says? And think how exciting and unpredictable our lives would be if we started living according to Jesus' way of life! Okay, I'll admit, our friends might say we had "lost our minds." Our acquaintances would give us funny looks and tell us we're "weird." Those who already dislike us would say we're fanatical and obsessed with this "Jesus business" and warn everyone to keep their distance from us because soon we'll be handing out religious tracts and trying to "save" them.

But Jesus, the man we follow and call Lord, had those kinds of negative, nasty things said about him. So maybe any criticism we received for being faithful to Christ would be a good indication that we're on the right track and doing the right thing as Christians.

So, what would happen, my dear friends, if you and I agreed to read one of the Gospels until we came to a place that told us to do something; then we stopped right there and went out to do it, and only after we had done it began reading again? Do we dare to find out what would happen?

Well, let's see. Jesus said, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Oh, our Lord is telling us to do something. I think I'll stop there. Amen.