

Acts 10: 44-48
I John 5: 1-6
John 15: 9-17

Love that Conquers
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Mary R. Brownlow

I once heard a story: or maybe a sort of speculation. It is about the reason babies begin to smile at the age of one or two months. The story – or hypothesis – is that way back when human beings were surviving in the jungle or savannah, just beginning to form societies and tribes, a baby would be born. For about a month, the novelty of this little bundle of cuteness was such that the mother or father would carry it everywhere with them, even though it cried and made messes and required feeding. Then, just when the parent was ready to get rid of this no-longer-novel, troublesome creature...it would smile at them. Then all bets were off: the parents were hopelessly entrapped, smitten, conquered. It was a very clever bonding strategy on the part of a child. And so the human race survives. Because of smiles. As a baby learns to imitate its parents, the relationship continues to grow.

By the way, the “secular” self-help world has adopted some of the techniques of inducing joy, of producing those chemicals that help us expand our brains and our networks. One suggestion is to smile for 60 seconds every morning when you wake up. Just smile, no matter how you feel. Apparently it changes our brain chemistry, our approach to life, or as someone named Zengirl, writes, “Smile 1 minute during any time of the day and go out and conquer your day.” Conquer your day, or grow your relationships.

Growing relationships: this is what our Scriptures today reveal. The Gospel passage continues last week’s discourse by Jesus to his disciples on their last evening together. He used the image of a well-tended vine with branches to illustrate the relationships between God, Jesus and the gathered community. Rather than bonding, the words used are “abiding” and “loving.” “Abide in my love,” he urges them, almost begging them to stay with him, even though he is the one who will be leaving the physical realm. As one writer put it, “He twines his words around them, calling them to persist in their **sacred entanglement** that will bear fruit for a hungry world.” Jesus declares: “You are my friends, not my servants.” This is not coercion, but something more powerful, a sacramental bond of growing intimacy.

The disciples are called to a “sacred entanglement” a sort of developmental process of imitation – something like a parent callings smiles out of their infant. “Imitate me in my commandment-keeping ways,” Jesus seems to say, “and your joy will be complete.” More smiles.

Notice that keeping commandments has little to do with what we traditionally associate with laws and rules. It just as simple (or as complicated) as loving the way Jesus loved. This is simple because it does not take long to say, complicated because it takes a lifetime to figure it out. It is also circular. When we determine an activity that is central to the life of our community, it makes us more aware of its importance, and we consciously engage. Ideally, it then becomes habitual, and intuitive. Which ingrains it more deeply into community culture. The way John puts it: God is love. Through Jesus, God commands the disciples to love. They begin to obey, become more loving, and then discover more of what it means to say that God is love, which inspires them to practice it even more. A never-ending circle, a spiritual and ethical spiral.

We see one stage of this spiral in the book of Acts. Peter, one of the leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem after the first Easter and Pentecost, is a good Jew. He has been following all the rules and practices of his faith, while preaching the love and grace of Jesus at the same time. He has understood the Gospel Good News to be for his fellow Jews, and does not wish to associate with Gentiles, let alone those occupying Roman forces. Through a dream (more than one dream actually), he is led to the household of the Centurion Cornelius, who eagerly listens to his preaching. The passage that was read today follows his sermon. Peter and his friends are astounded that the Holy Spirit skips over the boundary between Gentile and Jews, infusing the Roman household with genuine praise. The spiral widens: the love shared between believers burst the bounds that had previously been so clear. As the disciples imitate, in the wider world, Jesus' expensive love, they find new horizons before them.

When we read these two passages, and look back at the beginnings of the church with hindsight, we may be tempted to think that all this loving and boundary-breaking was obvious, inevitable, the only way it could happen. But this is not so. It was not obvious to Peter or John any of their friends that "love is the answer" or that the Christian Church would become an established institution and influence on the world. I am sure that they would be amazed to see the transformation of the church from a persecuted minority into a persecuting majority. I was particularly aware of this as I read the passage from the letter of John, with "whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world: our faith." John uses the language of empire and turning it on its head. To "conquer the world" in empire-speak is to dominate militarily or ideologically, through raw physical power. To "conquer the world" in faith-speak is imitate Jesus in offering the world compassion, love, justice: to "conquer" in the pattern of the ever-widening spiral of inclusion and respect, to follow the lead of the gentle and conquering Holy Spirit, that surprising and mind-bending expander of what's possible. This kind of conquering operates within the everyday world but brings with it a taste of heaven. How often has the Christian Church been content with empire-like domination, instead of subversive imitation and influence.

And, we read that this subversion is joyful! Jesus teaches these things so that his joy may be in us, and that our joy may be complete – as complete as that baby's first smile! How wonderful! But I know what you are thinking. Jesus would have been totally out of touch with our reality. Baltimore, Ferguson, Nepal, discrimination, homophobia, misogyny, abuse, apathy, depression, illness, sorrow. In this week, in our time, in our world, talk of love and joy can feel like a slap in the face.

We need to remember that the setting for these words of Jesus was not a beautiful country hillside or a warm and cozy fireside, or a light and airy place of worship at a time of relaxation and leisure. Things were bad and they were going to get worse: this is the time of Jesus' arrest and impending death. The Roman occupation was going to become more brutal. Disagreements between nations and tribes and religions were violent. But that was exactly the moment when presence of joy needed to be named, needed to be felt, needed to be practiced - when they faced things that assume and anticipate a profound absence of joy. This was that was exactly the moment when abiding love, and the commandment to love, had the most power – when the forces of hate and division seemed to hold sway. This was not practicing ignorance or illusion or putting on the blinders of narrow self-interest. It was going wide-eyed into places of physical and moral danger with hands and hearts open. This was how Jesus and his followers conquered.

I have seen the power of joy and abiding love entering a room of pain and conquering isolation and fear. I have seen the power of trust and peace enter a place of anger and conquering strife. I have seen the power of a smile connecting enemies who share no language, and leaping across the divide to create a new pathway for divine love.

Carl Sandburg said, "A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on." Deep within us is something that wants to cooperate with this opinion of God's. Today, mothers and fathers are still teaching their babies to smile, and still being drawn into that form of sacred entanglement. May we learn from our deepest loves and needs. May we be drawn into the sacred entanglement of God's abiding love and joy, and find those bonds of caring beyond our nearest relationships. May we find the conquering power of the love that casts out fear. May we find the Kingdom of God, within us and among us.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta wrote:

*We all long for heaven where God is,
but we have it in our power to be in heaven with Him at this very moment.
But being happy with Him now means:
Loving as He loves,
Helping as He helps,
Giving as He gives,
Serving as He serves,
Rescuing as He rescues,
Being with Him twenty-four hours,
Touching Him in his distressing disguise.
Amen.*