

How Do We Love the People We Fear?

At the end of a worship service that I had led a person asked me, “How do I love a “_____”?” She named people who belong to a very specific non-Christian religion. I was stunned for a moment since we were both Christian believers. It was clear that she was embarrassed at having to ask the question. It was equally clear that she was afraid of anyone who belonged to that non-Christian faith group. She was clearly defensive, but she trusted me enough to at least ask her question.

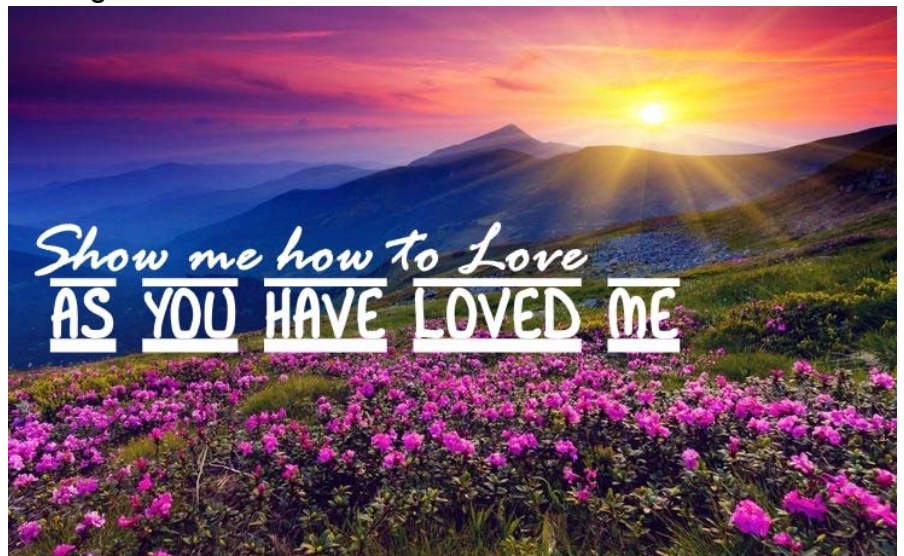
How do we get so frightened of people we don't know who have not threatened to harm us? Why do we not know how to love all of God's people including those we perceive to be different from us? Of course, the obvious answer is that we divide all of humanity into either “Us” or “Them.” We trust those who are like “Us” and fear “Them.” Still, as a Christian pastor I was shocked that this division had reached so deeply into her.

However, it was hardly the first time that I had seen Christians do this. My parishioners (in Maine) began telling me stories during coffee hour about members of another Christian church, a particularly conservative one located nearby. The members of the nearby church were making our folks very uncomfortable. How? At the urging of their pastor, they began to knock at the doors of people in our town who did not belong to their congregation. When someone answered the door the visitor from this church would ask, “If you died tonight do you know where you would go?”

The question was clearly intended to strike fear of eternal punishment (as in “going to Hell”) into the hearts of whoever answered the door. If they could not frighten us, the visitor's goal was to at least plant a seed of doubt in our hearts. Then they would ask if they could come into our homes and visit. Of course, the purpose was not to make friends. They wanted to “save us” from the fate that they believed we would otherwise suffer because of our sins. To this other Christian group we were “Them.”

I'm not writing about the merits of either their question or their faith statement. Nor am I suggesting that we allow people who cause us anxiety into our homes. Each of us needs our personal boundaries respected. I am, however, raising the question of how we love a person who is somehow different from us?

When I was asked this question years ago about the intrusive visitors from another church and more recently by a friend who was frightened by members of a non-Christian faith group, I responded with the only answer I could. If we want to love someone we fear, we begin by recognizing that person as a child of God who is no less loved by God than we are. We must acknowledge to ourselves and to anyone who heard us condemn a person we perceive as “Them” that the people we treat as “Them” are just as important to God as we are.



The famous 20th century Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in the third volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*: “It is not enough to love mankind—you must be able to stand people.” I've read several of Solzhenitsyn's books. He has a way with words. He also has the ability to confront parts of our humanity that we would rather not think about too closely.

The message of the Christian Gospels is that God has and always will love us so much that God took the extraordinary step of becoming one of us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Solzhenitsyn is right. We cannot love “mankind.” We can with God's help, however, love one person at a time.

Too often we find it easier to be afraid than to love. To continually be afraid is to deny the inherent worth conferred by God to each person whom God creates.

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