

Showing Love

Jesus said to his disciples: “If you love me you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15)

My all time favorite Broadway musical is “My Fair Lady.” The original 1956 New York City production set what was then the record for longest run of any major musical theater production in history. It was followed by a hit London production, a popular film version, starring Audrey Hepburn in the lead role, numerous revivals and tons of amateur productions. Based on George Bernard Shaw’s play Pygmalion, “My Fair Lady” has been called “the perfect musical.”

I saw the original touring company production of the smash hit at the Auditorium Theatre on East Main Street in Rochester with my 6th grade class in 1958 – 53 years ago. It made quite an impression on me. I was 13 years old; it was my first experience of a Broadway musical; and I was completely enchanted.

In the third act, following Eliza Doolittle’s transformation from a common cockney flower girl into an elegant lady, her would-be suitor, Freddie Emsford Hill, sings about his love for her. Exasperated by his *flowery* language, she cuts him off mid-lyric and sings... “Don’t *talk* of love lasting through time, make me no undying vows, *show me, show me... now!*”

In the 1996 Academy Award winning movie Jerry McGuire about a down-on-his-luck, formerly successful, sports agent, played by Tom Cruise, the agent attempts to keep his only remaining star athlete as a client by promising him lucrative product endorsements. The skeptical athlete, played by Cuba Gooding Jr., retorts emphatically – “*Show me the money; show me the money!*” In both instances Eliza and the star athlete are saying, in effect, actions speak louder than words.

In today's gospel reading from **John**, Jesus is delivering his farewell remarks to the disciples at the Last Supper on the night before he dies. He's giving them last minute instructions on how they are to behave when he's no longer there to guide them in person. He tells them: "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*" In an earlier part of John's gospel, Jesus tells them "*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another... as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*" To make his meaning crystal clear, at the Last Supper he washes the disciples' feet and tells them: "*As I have done for you, so you must do for others.*" In other words,... what you *do* is more important than what you *say*. Or put another way...actions speak louder than words.

A man was trying to get financial help for a widow who was in dire need, but his efforts were meeting with little success. Even so, most of the people he contacted did express their regret over the sad situation of the poverty-stricken woman. The concerned man, refusing to give up, had high hopes as he approached a wealthy acquaintance, but the acquaintance too refused to offer help. In declining the request, the rich man said: "I do want you to know, however, that I really feel sorry for that poor woman." The one asking for money responded, "I'm sure you do. But I'm afraid you don't feel it in the right place." "Oh, yes, I do," the man being asked to give replied. "I feel it very deeply in my heart." The other man responded, "That's the problem. You feel it in the wrong place. I just wish those feelings were also in your pocket."

The rich man's *inaction* speaks volumes, wouldn't you say? Is there any doubt that his response to the widow's plight fails to demonstrate the kind of proactive love that Jesus has in mind in today's gospel? That kind of love, termed "agape" in Greek, is an attitude, a decision of the heart to put another's interest before self interest. It's a willingness to sacrifice for another,

even if it hurts, like forgiving while expecting nothing in return. When you love as Jesus loves, someone else's welfare, growth, joy, become your paramount concern. Your happiness comes from bringing about their wellbeing.

John's gospel teaches that God's very essence is love. Christian love, therefore, gives us the closest glimpse of God we can get this side of eternity. Poets describe it as the threshold where divine and human presence ebb and flow into each other.

Loving like Jesus certainly isn't instinctive and doesn't happen automatically. On the contrary, it has to be learned, cultivated, and practiced through the trials of life. And admittedly it's often a struggle, but, without doubt, the reward to both giver and receiver are certainly worth the effort.

Loving like Jesus requires that we care about people irrespective of who they are or where they come from. It requires us to empathize with and respond to their need, especially that of the poor, the oppressed, and the underprivileged. Because the "last and least" are the ones with whom Jesus identifies most particularly, we, his followers, are meant to see the face of God above all else in the faces of suffering people everywhere.

If God touches you this kind of love, the result, inevitably, is divine love flowing through you to others. And when you experience this kind of love, your heart longs to show it in tangible, concrete ways.

A man spoke with the Lord about heaven and hell. "I will show you hell," said the Lord, and they went into a room which had a large pot of stew in the middle of it.

The smell was delicious, but around the pot sat desperate people, gaunt and emaciated like concentration camp survivors, all of them starving. All were holding spoons with very long

handles which reached into the pot, but because the handle of the spoon was longer than their arms, it was impossible to get the stew into their mouths. The suffering was terrible!

“Now I will show you heaven,” said the Lord, and they went into another room identical to the first one. There was a similar pot of delicious stew and the people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were all well nourished, animated and happy. At first the man did not understand. “It’s simple,” said the Lord. “You see, they have learned to feed each other!”

Through our baptism, when it is that we receive the Holy Spirit promised in today’s gospel reading, you and I are empowered to become Jesus for another other. That’s how the Risen One remains present among us until he comes again in glory at the end of time, which in case you haven’t been paying attention didn’t happen last Saturday as predicted. The First and Second Great Commandments require us to *demonstrate* our love for God by loving and serving our neighbor... not in the abstract, not in theory, not in general... but in actuality. *“Faith without works,”* Scripture warns us, *“is dead.”* *“Be doers of the Word, not hearers only.”* *“By their fruit, you will know them.”* Christian love, in other words, is a verb that requires action.

In short, we all need to do a better job of practicing what we preach. Or in today’s vernacular, a better job of walking the walk. So let’s not about just talk about love.... Let’s show it more often!

Anthony J. Sciolino

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; 1Peter 3: 15-18; John 14:15-21. 6th Sunday of Easter.

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