

Love Beyond Naiveté and Romance

By Father Ron Rolheiser, OMI, November 13, 2011

Several years ago, a Presbyterian minister I know challenged his congregation to open its doors and its heart more fully to the poor. The congregation initially responded with enthusiasm and a number of programs were introduced that actively invited people from the less-privileged economic areas of the city, including a number of street-people, to come their church.

But the romance soon died as coffee cups and other loose items began to disappear, some handbags were stolen, and the church and meeting space were often left messy and soiled. A number of the congregation began to complain and demand an end to the experiment: “This isn’t what we expected! Our church isn’t clean and safe anymore! We wanted to reach out to these people and this is what we get! This is too messy to continue!”

But the minister held his ground, pointing out that their expectations were naïve, that what they were experiencing was precisely part of the cost of reaching out to the poor, and that Jesus assures us that loving is unsafe and messy, not just in reaching out to the poor but in reaching out to anyone.

We like to think of ourselves as gracious and loving, but, the truth be told, that is predicated on an overly-naïve and overly-romanticized notion of love. We don’t really love as Jesus invites us to when he says: Love each other as I have loved you! The tail-end of that sentence contains the challenge: Jesus doesn’t say, love each other according to the spontaneous movements of your heart; nor, love each other as society defines love, but rather: Love each other as I have loved you!

And, for the most part, we haven’t done that:

- We haven’t loved our enemies, nor turned the other cheek and reached out to embrace those who hate us. We haven’t prayed for those who oppose us.
- We haven’t forgiven those who hurt us, nor forgiven those who have murdered our loved ones. We haven’t, in the midst of being hurt, asked God to forgive the very people who are hurting us because they are not really cognizant of what they are doing.
- We haven’t been big-hearted and taken the high-road when we’ve been slighted or ignored, nor at those times have we let understanding and empathy replace bitterness and our desire to withdraw. We haven’t let go of our grudges.
- We haven’t let ourselves be vulnerable to the point of risking humiliation and rejection in our offers of love. We haven’t given up our fear being misunderstood, of not looking good, of not appearing strong and in control. We haven’t set out barefooted, to love without security in our pockets.
- We haven’t opened our hearts enough to imitate Jesus’ universal, non-discriminating embrace, nor have we been able to stretch our hearts to see everyone as brother or sister, regardless of race, color, or religion. We haven’t stopped nursing the silent secret that our own lives and the lives of our loved ones are more precious than those of the rest of the world.

- We haven't made a preferential option for the poor, haven't brought the poor to our tables, and haven't yet abandoned our propensity to be with the attractive and the influential.
- We haven't sacrificed ourselves fully to the point of losing everything for the sake of others. We haven't ever really laid down our lives for our friends - nor, especially, for our enemies. We haven't been willing to die for the very people who oppose us and are trying to crucify us.
- We haven't loved with pure intention in our hearts, without somehow seeking ourselves within our relationships. We haven't let our hearts be broken rather than, however subtly, violate someone else.
- We haven't walked in patience, giving others the full space they need to relate to us according to their own inner dictates. We haven't been willing to patiently sweat blood in order to be faithful. We haven't waited in patience, in God's good-time, for God's judgment on right and wrong.
- We haven't resisted our natural urge to judge others, to not impute motives. We haven't left judgment to God.
- Finally, not least, we haven't loved and forgiven ourselves, knowing that no mistake we make stands between us and God. We haven't trusted God's love enough to always begin anew inside of God's infinite mercy.
- We haven't loved as Jesus loved.

After his wife, Raïssa, died, Jacques Maritain edited a book of her journals. In the Preface of that book he describes her struggle with the illness that eventually killed her. Severely debilitated and unable to speak, she struggled mightily in her last days. Her suffering both tested and matured Maritain's own faith. Mightily sobered by seeing his wife's sufferings, he wrote: Only two kinds of people think that love is easy: saints, who through long years of self-sacrifice have made a habit of virtue, and naïve persons who don't know what they're talking about.