



Challenge to Love

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In the last article I wrote how Francis called us to love others, even our enemies. As Secular Franciscans, it should

be who we are and what we do. We should be people who love. But many times we fall short and find it hard to answer that “call.”

This time, however, I would like to explore the difficulties in loving someone in concrete and normal ways. It sounds so easy, but it takes self knowledge, discernment and discipline to grow in love.

Have you ever been so hurt that you find it difficult to love? Have you done what St. Paul has described himself as doing: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate?” (Romans 7:15)¹

As I have gotten older, I have realized that many times my own self has gotten in the way of giving and loving. My “false self” of self pity, self importance and self interest prevents me from being stretched out on the cross of love. Many times I have felt that I have no more to give. I am tired of trying to extend myself to love more and give more.

Then I realize that Jesus is calling me gently. He doesn’t force, he doesn’t make demands...he invites! God realizes our past history which might make it difficult for us to respond in the most loving way, but that’s OK. He doesn’t give up on us and when we are ready, we will give and love because *we love Him!*

My question has been: OK, if God is willing to wait for me to let go of past hurts or my limitations so that I might love more, what can I do? How can I do my part in stretching myself to love?

I pray. Sometimes prayer is all that is needed to spend more time with the Lord and be refreshed: increasing prayer time or a change of prayer form, going on retreat or a mini vacation with God.

Other times, I pray that God will show me what is keeping me from opening up to love others. If it’s a wound from my past, I can then pray for the healing of it. This takes time and patience. He is working within us, transforming us even when we are not aware of it, for our time is not the Lord’s time. He is in charge, not us.

At other times, I need to discern - especially if I detect feelings of being hurt or of being injured. When I have discerned a meanness or anger towards others, it sends up a red flag for me. Although feelings are neither right nor wrong, it is when we start acting on them, that it becomes sin. When anger or meanness is present, I know that the evil one is trying to enter into my life through a wound. I pray to bind up that evil, calling it by name (self pity, selfishness, self righteousness) and I leave it at the feet of Jesus. I then pray to let go of those self absorbed feelings and be free to love with the love of Jesus. This takes time. It also takes self discipline not to fall back into the oh so easy ways of comforting anger and meanness. Recognize it for what it is! The devil is using the injustices you have experienced in the past to drive a wedge between you and your God. St. Paul says: “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.”(Romans 7:20) Yes, we can rail against injustice just like Jesus did when He overturned the tables at the temple, but where the sin begins is when we justify our anger by acting on it towards other people. We are just extending that evil in the world. Instead of being agents of love, we become agents for hate without realizing it!

It is often very difficult to absorb the hurt in our lives and transform it into love. This we cannot do without the Lord and prayer. It is only He who can heal the hurt and injuries in our lives and free us to love. The word “free” is important here! When we hold on to our feelings of injury and hurt, we are bound by them. We are not free. We are bound to evil. We must “let go” which is scary and painful. This letting go forces us to change the way we think and act. But if we want to mature in the love of God and share His way, we must make that decision.

I speak about love being a decision and yes, it is! The decision to love is not always an easy one. We must “put aside childish things” (1Cor.13:11) and “put on Christ” (Gal.3:27) It takes courage. It also takes love. We love Jesus on the cross so much that we are willing “to deny our very selves, take up His cross and follow Him” (Mt 16:24) We share in the mystery of His love on the cross. It is His love that draws us to make the necessary changes in our lives. Instead of a “giving up” or a forced giving to others, we are set free to love.

“Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but He said to me, “my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content ... for when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Cor 12:8-10

¹ All quotes are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible, Catholic Edition.