

Easter 6-B
St. John's Cathedral
May 6, 2018

About 25 years ago, I was in a deserted cathedral office on a Saturday morning using the copy machine when a man came through the front door. He was pretty obviously intoxicated. He wanted to talk to a priest.

So I took him into an office, got him a drink of water and we began to talk. He teetered a bit on the chair, then asked for some money to get a bus ticket to Montana.

He was in no shape to travel, and we didn't just hand out cash, so we talked a bit. I offered to find him a spot in a shelter, or to try to get him into detox. (I secretly hoped he wouldn't throw up on Canon Craft's rug.) At some point the conversation came to an abrupt end and he decided to leave, clearly frustrated that we didn't have money for him.

He walked to the door, started out, then turned around, looked me right in the eye and asked, "What is the Church for, anyway."

He went away, but the question has stayed with me for many years. What is the Church for, anyway? I didn't have a quick answer for him – at least one that wasn't buried in theological jargon. Over the years I've thought about how to answer a question like that in a way that would be helpful 'on the spot' like we were that morning and for that I am thankful to him.

In a way, he was asking for me to give him a job description for the church – a complicated question. You might want to think about how you would have

answered him. Living into the good news? Practicing compassion and hope? Living the values of the reign of God?

Churches have wrestled with crafting mission statements that try to answer that man's question. (The essence of ours here is to be a community that invites people into a life that helps them discover what it means to be beloved children of God.) But I'm pretty sure that any mission statement, no matter how beautifully written, would not have helped this man at that moment grasp the essence of what the church is for.

I wondered, as I read through today's gospel this week, if there is at least the suggestion of a job description for the church in Jesus' words: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." As we've moved through the Easter season this year, this theme has emerged again and again – as an almost endless loop of teaching on love.

In This section of John, known as the farewell discourse, there is a lot of teaching. John's account frames this discourse both as a way that Jesus comforted and encouraged his disciples as he moved toward his death – and also gave them a job description of sorts – a way of living into his life and teaching as they would continue after his death and resurrection.

I mentioned a few weeks ago that a question for the disciples as they wrestled with Jesus' death and began to comprehend his resurrection was "how will we go on?" How will we continue in the teaching we have received, the life we have shared, the love that has been shown to us? They were in the midst of a profound transition between living with Jesus as their companion in ministry – their teacher,

friend and master – and embracing him as their risen Lord. And as we know, transitions (no matter how they happen in our lives) are complicated times – times of re-grouping, re-shaping, moving ahead with new courage and creativity.

Love one another as I have loved you. That is the job description here. Often we think of love as something that is tender – and maybe kind of amorphous – hard to define. Goodness knows it is more than just being nice, although kindness is often a way love is experienced.

The kind of love Jesus is talking about here is the self-giving love of God – in Greek, agape. It is the love that the Father shared with Jesus and the love that Jesus shares with us.

But what does it look like?

Maybe one way to get a handle on this is to see it as adjusting our vision. Practicing this kind of love asks us to see others as God sees them. If you have ever had someone who drives you nuts, try adjusting your vision in this way. Try to look at that person – or group of people – as God would see them. Try to see them as the beloved children of God that we all hope to be. The annoying neighbor, the person with the political bumper sticker that offends your politics, the know-it-all.

That's not always an easy thing to do. Maybe it takes practice. When you get a new eyeglass prescription it takes a while to get used to the correction. You have to keep wearing the glasses or contacts for a while as your vision adjusts. Seeing others as God sees them can be a bit like that.

Another concrete connection comes from servanthood. Remember a during Holy Week when we heard the account of the last supper -- In the story in John's

gospel, Jesus washes the disciples feet as a sign of humility and servanthood. At the very end of that reading comes the new commandment – “ Love one another as I have loved you.”

Those two actions are related. In our dismissal from the Eucharist, the deacon often says, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” We serve in love. We take our cue from Jesus as he performed the act of foot-washing – something that was most often assigned to the lowest-ranking household servant.

And opportunities abound to love in that way as we embrace service. Many of my friends deliver food to through Meals on Wheels – bringing both nourishment and caring. We have opportunities at the West Central Mission to provide and share a Wednesday meal with folks who just don’t have a regular place to gather around the table. In a previous parish, folks spent time at the nearby public school, reading aloud with children who did not get to do that very much at home.

This is a concrete way of loving that sees the face of God in others, that asks nothing in return -- and shares good news in many ways.

Some of the best summers of my life involved trips to Mexico with college students to build simple homes with Habitat for Humanity in small villages. We would join with the family whose house it would be, plus a host of volunteers from the village, to build these cement block houses that would become their homes. It was not glamorous work. It was a lot of heavy lifting, mixing mortar and concrete on the ground with shovels, pushing heavy wheelbarrows full of sand and any number of other tasks. But it was work shared with a village.

I think the students came with all different kinds of expectations. One of them was probably that we would bring all kinds of our expertise into the project. That was quickly dispelled as we molded into a team. There was 'aha moment' after 'aha moment.'

The biggest learning, I think, was that there was a lot more going on besides building a house. We were working side by side with new friends in a new culture for most of them. We were also sharing meals, sharing stories and laughter, and learning about life in a place like Tlacotepec or Coatetelco –places you might not find on a map. Places where most of the people had very little of what we take for granted.

It was hard work on the job site. No doubt about that. But it was also a place that grabbed their hearts. It was a place where the love of God was practiced – discovered – shared – celebrated. We were all beloved children of God.

And for that I give thanks.