Novena Reflection

7 March 2022

By Matthew Pearl

I have a confession to make. I’m not a very patient person.

I’m the guy at the market who’s scoping out the shortest check-out line, or better yet heading straight to the self-check-out where there is no line. So the idea of trusting the slow work of anything is a challenge for me, and yet our novena this year invites us to trust in the slow work of God.

In the first reading, God speaks to Moses about the slow and holy work of being in right relationship with others. God describes what isn’t holy, like lying to, stealing from and hating our neighbors. These kinds of destructive behaviors create social and interpersonal chaos. When we engage in them, we succumb to our primal instincts for self-gratification and self-interest that’s rooted in our self-centered fears about losing what we have or not getting what we want. These behaviors are “unholy” because they harden our hearts and disconnect us from each other, from the Body of Christ.

In South Africa there is a saying called “ubuntu.” It means “I am who I am because we are who we are.” Another way of thinking about it is that I come to know myself by knowing you. We were born to be in relationship with each other. As individuals we are just one part of the many parts of the Body of Christ.

Our individuality is a gift, but it comes at the cost of feeling separate, alone and incomplete. We yearn to be “whole.” Holy. We need each other as we journey down the path to greater wholeness together.

That journey is made more difficult when we judge and criticize others, usually because they’re not like us. Learning how to shift from judging others to caring about them is slow and difficult work, especially when people give us plenty of reasons not to like them.

We live in a “me” vs “we” society. The ongoing controversy about how people are responding to COVID health restrictions is a good example of that. Some feel that these restrictions and mandates, although undesirable, are necessary to protect people. Others feel that any forced limitation to their independence is a violation of their constitutionally guaranteed freedoms. Regardless of which side of the issue you land, the tendency is to judge the other side as “wrong and bad.” It’s easy to feel self-justified in our view because we are, after all, right, right?

Unfortunately the price we pay for being right is becoming disconnected from those we judge. Whether we want to admit it or not, they are part of the Body of Christ as well. What’s more difficult to do is to put ourselves in the other person’s shoes, like Jesus did, with the intention of understanding and empathizing with their suffering instead of judging it. We don’t have to agree with a person to be kind to them.

Take a moment and remember a time when someone unconditionally loved and accepted you. Loved you for who you are warts and all.

That’s how God loves us through each other. For me, it’s been slow work to really believe in and accept that love.

In the reading God commands that we should love our neighbor as ourselves, which means it’s necessary to love ourselves first. That’s a tall order for many, especially those who have been marginalized by society and targeted as those “other” people.

When a person is judged as less than, “wrong,” undeserving, sinful, or not good enough, they experience shame. That shame tells them that they deserve the harsh judgements of others. They feel defective, unlovable and irreparably so.

It is here that God’s healing mercy is needed most. God’s love is unearned and freely given. Jesus gravitated to people who needed to be healed with that kind of love. Not because they were “bad,” but because they were suffering from their life circumstances.

In the gospel passage, Jesus says that “whatever you do for the least of my brothers, you do for me.” He is comparing himself to the least of his brothers. This comparison goes beyond feeling charity for them, but instead feeling solidarity with them as one of them, which in many ways he was at the time: poor, homeless, and expendable.

Jesus is saying that if you want to love him, love them by joining with them in their suffering. That’s where the healing happens. That’s where God is revealed. This is not easy to do when our own capacity to love is affected by our life experiences, society and the institutions that shape us.

Jesus said that “wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there.” I can’t think of a better example of the healing that comes in numbers than in twelve step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous. It’s easier to empathize with someone when you’ve walked in their shoes. In this case, the suffering that resulted from an addiction is the very thing that binds people together in the hope for recovery. They don’t have to do it alone.

The addict’s hope for recovery enables them to overlook the countless ways they are different from other addicts and focus instead on how they are similar: broken, imperfect, fearful, empty, hopeless… human. It is by humbly accepting and acknowledging these painful realities that all humans experience and having them witnessed and acknowledged by others that the door to being healed is opened and a new way of life begins:

Moving from fear to faith. From self-criticism to self-care. From judging to compassion. From resenting to forgiving. From self-interest to generosity. From bondage to freedom. From isolation to connection. From despair to hope. From suffering to peace.

Healing begins when we are able to acknowledge our human shortcomings and accept God’s mercy that is expressed in the caring support of others.

We have a couple of rambunctious cats at home and every once in a while I get a scratch on my hand when playing with them. I am always amazed at the body’s ability to heal when the scratch slowly disappears over the course of days. It makes me think that if the body is capable of healing itself so miraculously, perhaps the heart can heal as well.

My hope during our novena and beyond is that we are all gifted with the faith and the trust that your heart and my heart, our hearts, can be healed by God’s transforming love.