

There's an old Gary Larson cartoon that I have always loved. (I so miss Gary Larson!) God is in the kitchen "cooking up" the world and looking like He's having fun doing it. There are all kinds of ingredients to sprinkle over the planet (which is in a pot cooking on the stove)—birds and trees and reptiles and light-skinned people and medium-skinned people and dark-skinned people. But the "spice" that God is holding in his hands says "jerks." And the bubble over God's head says, "just to make it interesting..."

A few years ago I read a book published by the Alban Institute with the title: *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior*. The target audience was pastors. The fact that you have to write a book that counsels pastors to never call their parishioners jerks is evidence that they are, on occasion, tempted to do so. (Not that I have ever personally succumbed to this temptation!) But sometimes in the midst of our own disappointments (and fears) we are tempted to see those who stand in our way or who hurt or disappoint us as "jerks." Clergy give up a lot to go to seminary and to be ordained and their families are often asked to give up even more. Usually they have a fairly clear idea of what they hope they can get the church to look like. And so they come out of seminary and a bishop puts her hands on their head and then they go out and try to make it happen. Along the way, however, you will bump up against resistance, some of it in its healthier manifestations and sometimes it not so much.

In his little book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds seminarians who are training to be pastors that it is a privilege we should never take for granted to live among other Christians. He recalls the loneliness of St. John on the island of Patmos and of St. Paul in prison and of prisoners and the sick in our own time. Christian community is a great gift, he says. And the only proper response to such a gift (even when we believe that people are acting like "jerks") is to be thankful. Bonhoeffer reminds us that our sister or brother is a person who has, like us, been redeemed by Jesus Christ. Expecting them to be perfect or to fulfill *our* ideals or to meet our expectations is not of God. And so he writes:

...our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us; I must meet [my brother or sister] only as the person [s]he already is in Christ's eyes.

He goes on to quote Luke 9:46. As you may recall, Jesus and his disciples were making their way to Jerusalem when *an argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest*. Bonhoeffer says that no Christian community ever comes together without this thought emerging as a seed of discord, and that it is enough to destroy any community. He insists that it is necessary for every Christian community to face this enemy squarely by naming it and then dealing with it.

It is simply a fact that every congregation will include stronger and weaker persons: wise and foolish, gifted and less gifted, more and less devout. That great diversity of persons can become a temptation for us to talk about one another or to stand in judgment of one another, and even sometimes to begin to think that those who don't "get it" are "jerks." Sometimes we tear others down in the mistaken belief that it will raise us up. Bonhoeffer simply reminds his readers that **each and every person is a cause for rejoicing and for serving.**

Tonight's liturgy takes us to the very heart of this truth. There is nothing here that the most beginner Christian doesn't already know. This *novum maundatum* - this "new mandate" to love - is in truth just a reiteration of a very old commandment. It's the same in both testaments of the Bible and summarizes all the law and the prophets. *Love one another*. Some days it is hard for us to remember this, however, and most days, it is harder still to live it. But when we do, we go to the very core of what Jesus taught, and who he was and is as our crucified and risen Lord. St. Paul, too, as you no doubt recall, said that the essence of what it means to be Church is to be a kind of laboratory where we can practice patience and kindness and gentleness with one another: faith and hope and love all abide, but the greatest of these is love.

M. Scott Peck offers a re-telling of an old story that he calls, "The Rabbi's Gift," which I think is relevant to what this day is all about.

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in a decaying house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy years old. In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."

So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it,

Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off-off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. Within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

Sometimes we grate on one another's nerves and step on one another's toes. Vestries, staffs, choirs, altar guilds, mission committees, Church School classes, confirmation classes all have to deal with this fact of our humanity, and no part of this or any congregation gets a free pass. People can be annoying.

But never call them jerks. We are privileged, you and I, to share this journey of faith with one another, a communion of saints, a fellowship divine. This holy night, in this holy week that comes at the culmination of this holy season brings us back to the heart of the matter: we are called to live as a holy people. We are commanded to love one another. We are called to treat each other the way Christ treats us: with kindness and affection and mercy and gratitude.

And when we do that (with God's help!) the Church lives more faithfully into its vocation to be salt of the earth and light of the world. We become like that monastery, like a field of dreams, like a magnet that attracts people in, sometimes they don't even know why. But of this you can be certain: where love and charity are, there God is.

The world takes notice of us not primarily because the choir hits all the right notes, or because the preacher preached a great sermon, or because the Church School program is solid. The world knows that we are Christians by our love, and through our actions far more than our words, comes to know that God is love.