
Our Lives "A Lover's Quarrel"

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Invocation: In the name of God: Our Creator, Defender, Redeemer, & Friend. Amen

It was in the news last week. Were you watching the President's State of the Union address? Did we really see him "pick a fight" with the Supreme Court, specifically with Chief Justice Alito? To many it certainly looked that way. I've seen several replays of Justice Alito responding with a silent reaction that was caught on camera. "Not true" was his inaudible response to President Obama.

The President had charged that, in the future, foreign corporations will be able to influence our national elections by making huge campaign contributions. In this way the President chastised the Court for its recent decision to reverse our longstanding tradition of limiting contributions from all corporations.

Although not heard out loud, Justice Alito's "Not true" reminded some of a more raucous outburst in recent months. But this time they wondered whether there was incivility on the part of the President. Was the President himself being unfair: provoking an inevitable reaction from his superior position"from the position of his "bully pulpit" on prime time television in front of the nation and the world?

Now here, speaking of incivility, today's gospel confronts us with a scene in which Jesus also appears to "pick a fight." That's right! It happens in today's story of Jesus reading scripture in his hometown on the Sabbath day. Indeed, St. Luke's version of that story tells us something that none of the other gospels reveal about that day at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth.

In Luke there is an abrupt shift following last week's gospel reading. The shift occurs with everyone speaking well of Jesus at first. But then Jesus starts making provocative remarks"remarks that seem to be throwing their favorable comments back into their teeth. Indeed, so abrupt is this shift that we are justified in wondering whether something has been left out of the story. Or like the President in last week's State of the Union address, we find Jesus suddenly taking advantage of his own bully pulpit after reading scripture in front of everyone in the synagogue that day.

Here's the sequence of events. First, from last week's gospel reading we hear Jesus say to the synagogue congregation, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Immediately following that we read: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Lk. 4.21-22)

Now that's when Jesus responds with a series of provocative remarks. Here's Provocation One, in three parts: [Part 1] He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" [Part 2] And you will say, "Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." [Part 3] And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" (Lk. 4.22-24).

That's it for Provocation One in three parts. Then here's Provocation Two:

[He said,] "But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah . . . yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon" (Lk. 25-26).

And here's Jesus' last remark, Provocation Three:

"There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (Lk. 4.27).

Finally there's the end of the story:

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way (Lk. 4.28-30).

Now for a change of pace. Notice something different about these provocations. Notice that Jesus does not pick a fight just because he likes a good quarrel. People who just like to argue are like the drunken Irishman in that stereotype about the Irish' love of fighting. (Of course, to be politically correct we must acknowledge that this is only a stereotype, and not the norm for all Irish people.) But you know the story:

A drunken Irishman is walking along one day when he sees two other men fighting in the street. Immediately the fight grabs his attention and he interrupts them to ask, "Is this a private fight, or can anyone join?"

No: Jesus does not pick a fight like someone who just likes to fight and can't pass-up an opportunity. He is not bellicose by nature, or easily provoked, like someone who needs a course in anger management. That's not his tone in today's gospel exchange; not the way he challenges people in the text before us. But maybe you think otherwise. If so, hold that thought.

First, consider another type of provocateur that Jesus is NOT emulating in today's gospel. He is not like the frustrated businessman coming home from work one night. You know the sequence:

A man comes home upset because his boss yelled at him at the office earlier in the day. Then when he gets home he yells at his wife. Then the wife proceeds to yell at the children. Then the children yell at the dog. And finally, to complete the process, the dog growls and chases the cat.

No: neither does Jesus pick a fight like someone who is passing-on to the next person his own sense of being a victim, or being mistreated or disadvantaged. It is not out of resentment, spite, or peevishness that Jesus challenges his people in today's gospel. Or maybe you think otherwise. If so, hold that thought. We'll have a chance to revisit this question in a few minutes.

But first I want us to consider the following kind of fight in a family or in a marriage. It's the story of a couple going through a conflict in their relationship. The story is told by John Gottman, one of the most respected marriage counselors in the field. It's in a section of his book titled, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (1994).

The section is called, "The Ecology of Marriage." There Gottman argues that couples sometimes seem to "break-up" precisely in order to "make-up." That is, they seem to create certain conflicts in order to be able to have the experience of getting even closer after the conflicts are resolved. Gottman tells the story this way:

A friend once told me a story of a fight he had with his wife in which she felt that he had ignored her when they had house guests. She was very upset, but she would not discuss her feelings. For the first time in years she refused to talk to him. He was very distressed by all this, but gradually he accepted it and they both became silent, angry, recriminating, and sullen. Although they stayed distantly polite, this distance grew and grew over time. They still slept in the same bed but they avoided touching each other.

One day he saw his wife dressing as they prepared to go out together to a special concert. The evening had been planned months in advance, the tickets to the concert were very expensive, and neither of them had any intention of not going. As he watched his wife dress for the evening and comb her long hair he was struck by her beauty in a way he hadn't experienced in years. He was hypnotized by her shining hair, and he fell in love with the look of pride and dignity she held in her aloofness from him.

As the evening proceeded they found that they both enjoyed the concert a great deal and they forgot themselves a little bit. Their hands met and the touch was as electric as when they had first become lovers. They looked deeply into one another's eyes and kissed. That night . . . Afterward they held each other, and in the morning everything was all right. It was better than all right" something had been renewed. My friend and I wondered if the fight was really about anything real at all, or if it was part of a dance of distance and closeness in a marriage that in some way serves to renew the courtship, or, at least,

the attraction. (John Gottman, PhD, with Nan Silver, Why Marriages Succeed or Fail [NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994], pp. 64-65.)

Perhaps today's conflict at Nazareth gives us a similar example of a lover's quarrel" in this case, the quarrel between a prophet and his people. Consider in this connection today's second scripture reading, that celebrated passage on the nature of love in St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians: 1 Corinthians 13:

1If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge . . . but do not have love, I am nothing . . .
4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth . . .
8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end . . . 9For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13.1-2, 4-6, 8-13)

Perhaps, Christian friends, we can consider all the issues surrounding today's gospel from the perspective of St. Paul's famous hymn to love. From that perspective, reconsider the places where Jesus appears to pick a fight with his people. What do you think about his seeming complaint that prophets are not accepted in their hometown? Or his unfavorably comparing his own people to the foreign widow whom the prophet Elijah rescued, and to the Syrian leper whom the prophet Elisha healed. How do you regard the implication that his own people were not worthy of similar acts of salvation?

In that connection how does Jesus himself measure up to St. Paul's love ethic? In your judgment do his assertions seem to be "envious or boastful or arrogant or rude?" Does he appear to you to be "'insisting on his own way,' or "'irritable or resentful,' or "'rejoicing in wrongdoing instead of rejoicing in the truth?' Or rather, is Jesus picking a fight in today's gospel with a more prophetic intention" an intention that includes us too?

Could he be exposing in us too the places where we "'know [ourselves] only in part, and prophesy [about our lives] only in part?' Are we too "'seeing [ourselves] at first in a mirror, dimly, but [not yet] face to face; knowing only in part, but [not yet] knowing fully, even as we have been fully known?' (1 Cor. 13.9-10, 12)

Perhaps it is divine love that is "'picking a fight' with us too today, and prophesying to us too about certain places in ourselves; places in ourselves that would lead us too, like the people in Jesus' hometown that day, to become "'filled with rage, and to drive him out of town, and lead him to the brow of a hill on which our town is built, so that we might hurl him off the cliff' (Lk. 4.28-29)" and eventually, as we know, to crucify him.

Perhaps divine love is confronting us also today with a mirror; a mirror for a world that does not know its own capacity for wrongdoing, but must instead be challenged by creative conflicts in the name of God. Perhaps it is divine love that "'picks a fight' with all people in our everyday lives as well as in world affairs; perhaps God as love is creatively using conflict to call us beyond the places where we behave in the world like children, and are now being challenged to "'become adults, and put an end to child-like ways' (1 Cor. 13.11).

If so, if any of these suppositions find resonance in your spirit today, I invite you in the name of love to live out conflicts creatively. Let the conflicts in our lives become occasions not just to fight but to be transformed in our inner life too. And let us find a way to have God win that fight. Especially if our life feels like a lover's quarrel between ourselves and the living God, let God win that quarrel. And let Jesus pass through the midst of our raging conflicts and go on his resurrection way. May we be among those who follow him in that way" follow him into the abundant life that awaits those who use our lover's quarrel with God to become even more fully alive in him; more fully alive with the eternal life of those who belong to him.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Appendix

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Art in the Christian Tradition

Title:

The most important thing is love!! Read 1 Corinthians 13.

Notes:

Graffiti on a factory wall in Rorschach, Switzerland. The photographer provided this translation of 1 Corinthians, 13.

Love is patient, Love is Kind.

Love shows no sign of envy or pride.

Love displays no anger.

Love is blind to wrongdoing.

Love is very forgiving. Love takes no delight in evil.

Love rejoices in the truth.

Love always protects, always trusts.

Love always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails.

Together,

Love, Faith and Hope can never be broken.

But, of all these things,

the Greatest will forever be Love.

Date:

March 27, 2007

Artist:

Painter unknown; Kecko (photographer)

City/Town:

Rorschach

Country:

Switzerland

Permalink:

<http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54197>

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