

6 Epiphany A February 16, 2020
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Transformed Valentine's Day
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

“All great spirituality,” writes author and Franciscan friar Richard Rohr, “is what we do with our pain. If we do not transform our pain, we will transmit it to those around us.” This quote is powerfully illustrated every Valentine’s Day in Yorktown High School in Arlington, Virginia, in Melanie McCabe’s senior high school English class.

Every year, a day or so before Valentine’s Day, Melanie starts class by telling her students a story of love, heartbreak, and humiliation: all of them hers. She says as soon as she gives that introduction, every cell phone is face down and all eyes are on her. The story is about Melanie’s 11-year-old self who developed a crush on a boy in her class named David. According to Melanie, this boy was tall and cute and sort of a bad boy which only added to the appeal. He had absolutely no interest in her, but that didn’t stop Melanie from daydreaming and scribbling his initials swirled inside hearts all over her diary and notebooks.

Then comes Valentine’s Day elementary school style. Some of you might have similar memories of creating some sort of box or large envelope to put on the side of your desk to collect the Valentines everyone was supposed to bring on the day of the class party. And how parents bought boxes of sweet and corny little cards – I got one this year from the manager of CrossRoads Café’s three-year-old daughter that said, “You are my favorite friendasarus” with a picture of a dinosaur on it. She even signed it herself.

Melanie described the day of the party, how she spilled the contents of her Valentine’s Box on her desk, surprised to see among the small white envelopes, a large, red envelope sparkling with glitter. Who, she wondered, would spend so much money and time to tell her of their love? She tore it open with shaking hands, and under a picture of a queen in a glittering crown were the words, “To a queen of a Valentine,” and it was signed, “David” – her crush. It was only then she noticed on the top of the card, in uneven printed letters, he had written, “to the ugliest girl in the class.” Every year, in every class, Melanie tells her students of the deep pain those words and that Valentine had on her. How she felt like crying but didn’t want to show any emotion as she was afraid David and his

friends might be watching her to see how she reacted. She also tells her students she struggled with her sense of self worth and the celebration of Valentine's Day for a while after that.

But then she decided she wasn't going to let a childhood bully have that kind of power over her to turn a day about love into a day of pain. So, she decided to transform that pain into something positive. And that is where her high school students come in.

Every year, Melanie's students have a Valentine's Day party. They all make construction paper Valentine card holders and can decorate them any way they want. On the day of the party, Melanie gives out hundreds of small pieces of paper she cut out the night before and instructs her students to write a positive, honest, and earnest message to everyone in the class. Even if they don't know everyone very well, she says, there is always something positive to notice. Melanie says the best part is watching the students read their cards. She reports that for most students, this activity has a positive impact on their lives. Former students have told her they kept their cards and read them whenever they feel low. Other students say the Valentine exchange was a refreshing difference from the daily pressure they feel to succeed at sports or music, get all A's, or other stresses in their lives. Parents tell Melanie the Valentine exchange has helped their teenager's self-esteem issues and helped them be kinder to their siblings.

Melanie believes her students may not remember much of what she teaches them about grammar, writing, or literature. But she hopes that her Valentine exchange gives them all a day when they can see there is another way to live than the cruelty, division and cut-throat competition that can be so prevalent in society and culture. She hopes her students learn it is possible to love and respect each other instead of hurting each other. She writes, "Whatever hurt David intended for me all those years ago, it has been canceled out, many times over. I think he'd be surprised by his legacy."

This is what can happen when someone is brave enough to listen to Jesus' words in today's Gospel and transform their pain into love. Today's Gospel is still deep in Jesus' very long sermon on the mountain in Matthew's Gospel. This is the sermon where Jesus started by proclaiming those who are meek, poor, grieving, powerless, are in fact the people blessed by God, which contradicted the assumption those people were being punished by God and only the wealthy and powerful were blessed. Such a contradiction was probably intended to get

people's attention, and once he had their attention, Jesus went on to say he had not come to wipe out the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them, and that is where today's section of the sermon continues. Today we hear Jesus go deeper into the law and what fulfilling it looks like.

And it looks pretty impossible at first glance, doesn't it? It can be hard for us to imagine Jesus talking in any way but a dry, monotone, literalistic style sometimes. It might even sound like Jesus radicalized the commandments. But perhaps today's section of the sermon on the mountain is another way of stating what Richard Rohr's quote is about: that the spiritual life isn't about following rules for the rules' sake, that our 'goodness' be only defined by how well we color within the lines, but instead is about how the law can guide us in living the love God has given us, and can help us transform pain into love, healing, reconciliation, and honesty.

We can look at Jesus' words in today's Gospel and recognize he is addressing sources of pain: murder, violence, adultery, divorce, dishonesty. All these things can cause pain. One of the justifications we humans like to make for breaking the commandments or rules, is that if we aren't hurting anyone, and we are feeling pleasure, then it really isn't a problem. This justification puts the focus on self and the pleasure of self. Perhaps Jesus' words are a shift in how we look at the rules from self to how our words and actions affect others. Through this lens, the injunction against committing murder becomes an exhortation to peace and reconciliation, to work through our anger instead of succumbing to it, seeing the person we are conflict with as a full human instead of something less than human we have the right to dispose of. Likewise, the prohibition of adultery is transformed into the command to respect all human beings instead of dehumanizing them to a form of entertainment or pleasure for self. Divorce is transformed from the culturally acceptable practice of the time to dispose of a woman for whatever reason, to take into consideration the oppression of women in that culture. We have to remember in ancient times, marriage was not rooted in love, but was an economic agreement, one where the woman had few if any rights. So, divorce in those times might doom a woman to homelessness. Jesus' words about divorce are a command to consider the consequences the person with very little power will suffer. And through Jesus' lens, honesty becomes the way of all communications, so there is no need to come up with complicated systems to ensure someone isn't trying to deceive.

All these shifts represent what Jesus embodied in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection: the abundant life of God's love. Remember, in other places in the Gospel Jesus says he came to bring life and bring it in abundance. The words we heard in today's Gospel is what he was talking about when he talked about abundant life. He didn't mean more stuff or money. He meant living the love of God. Love that wipes out the desire for murder, adultery, or lying and shows respect to people of all genders. Through the lens of abundant life, we can look at divorce through the lens of Jesus, one that frees people from oppression and hurtful, abusive situations, and recognizes when a relationship dies, it is okay to acknowledge that death so that new life can begin. So that relationships can be healed through the transformation of pain.

Jesus' death and resurrection show us the power of the abundant life of God's love; love that is more powerful than death, love that is even more powerful than childhood humiliations caused by bullies who probably never thought how something he imagined would be a funny joke caused pain to another human being. Probably because he didn't see his classmate as someone of value, but as someone to make fun of for his own entertainment and pleasure.

That is the deep sin of humanity; that is what causes the divide between humanity and God and pits neighbors against neighbors. That is why Jesus' words in today's Gospel can sound harsh. And why none of us are strangers to such pain.

But that is why Jesus came, to transform those painful divides and make the way possible for our own transformation, healing, and reconciliation. It is not easy. But it possible. We can all find a way to live into this transformation. Just ask the students in Melanie McCabe's English classes a few days after Valentine's Day.