

Season of love

December 8, 2010

You might think "love" would be the easiest focus of Advent. But I'm not so sure.

Of course, Christmas and the cusp of a new year provide a great time to count our blessings. For most of us, the people we love rank high on the list. When I thank God for the blessings in my life, my wife, our daughters and their husbands, our expected grandchild, my parents and brother and extended family and friends land at the tip-top of my list. Recognizing the bounty of love I receive and the gladness of love I give comes easy, especially this time of year.

Counter-cultural command

But Jesus—the grown-up Jesus, whose life and pattern we follow the rest of the year—commanded us to love. And, as counter-cultural as it may seem, he didn't put qualifications on that love.

Talking to his followers, he explicitly commanded them—and us: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). Of course, the church has spent 2,000 years defying his command. If we can't love one another, how can we imagine loving others?

Loving ... enemies?

But that's exactly what he told us to do. When someone asked Jesus to define a neighbor—someone obviously worthy of love—Jesus surprised his audience. He told a story about his listeners' harshest rival and bitterest enemy.

In his most-famous sermon, he spelled it out clearly: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:43-45).

Let's face it, we live in unloving times. Virtually every sector of our culture highlights and emphasizes the opposite of love.

An ironic, tragic and, yes, darkly humorous episode of a news program featured contestants from a long line of "reality" TV shows fairly spitting out their mantra, "I didn't come here to make friends." They compete to win money, not to care about others, to risk loving others.

Talk-media, covering everything from sports to politics to entertainment, focuses on anger, put-downs, retribution.

And politics. Where to start? The end game is to destroy the enemy so your "side" can win the next election. Never mind that politicians can't love each other. They don't even love the American people, or else they would get along for the good of the country. No love there.

You can think of your own examples.

Loving the world

Explaining his own birth among humanity, Jesus pointed to love: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

God loves the world. Not just Christians. Not just nice people. Not just people like us. The world.

What better way to celebrate that love than by sharing it with others. The

good news is that our acts of loving kindness will stand out, because they will contrast so sharply with what we've come to expect. And they can serve as a new star to guide people to Jesus, the Christ, whose birth we soon will celebrate.