

“Loving Difficult People”

Before I lived in a Christian Community for four years, I always thought that living with other Christians would be the closest thing to heaven on earth. I remember one day hearing a father of one family share his exasperation over another Christian family in the same community who didn't believe in disciplining their children. This little guy used to go around punching the other little kids and the parents never reprimanded him or disciplined him. No amount of protest by other parents made any difference. Eventually this father said to his son “The next time Joel punches you Christopher, you punch him back as hard as you can.” He did, and you can imagine the strife that caused!

I don't know who authored this piece of Christian rhyme, but it's worth repeating.

“To live above with the saints we love

Oh that will be glory

But to live below with the saints we know

Well, that's another story!”

Who Is Your Difficult Person?

Do you have a person in your life who is a difficult person to love? The passage of scripture we are looking at this morning is about loving difficult people and being a Christian in difficult relationships. One of the fundamental characteristics of Christian community is that we not only learn to get on together, but that we actually learn to love one another.

Here is a way of checking to see if you have difficult people in your life.

- When they call you, you don't want to return the call.
- When you're with them, you can feel enthusiasm and energy just draining out of your body.
- Instead of feeling free and spontaneous with this person you feel awkward or angry or artificial.
- When you are talking with them you are very careful about what you say and how you say it.
- After being with this person you try to calm yourself by eating more than usual.

We Need Difficult People.

Actually, it's a good thing that we have difficult people in our lives. Difficult people reveal the condition of our hearts. Having a difficult person in our life can help us grow spiritually in ways that we wouldn't otherwise. One of the signs that we are the people of God is that we begin to love people that we wouldn't naturally love otherwise.

We see this supremely in Jesus. He invited anyone and everyone to be part of God's new community. Tax collectors, prostitutes, a Roman Centurion, a Samaritan adulteress, a criminal being crucified on a cross – he invited them all into this gracious, grace filled, new community. Most of the stories of Jesus told make the point that God is very serious about opening his community to anybody and everybody.

Philip Yancey quotes a story from the Boston Globe which is really a modern version of a parable that Jesus told. Accompanied by her fiancé, a woman went into the Hyatt hotel in downtown Boston and ordered the meal for their wedding banquet. Both of them had expensive tastes, and they chose the right china and the right flower arrangements. The bill came to 13,000 dollars. After leaving a cheque for half that amount as a down payment, the couple went home. The day the invitations were to go out, the groom got cold feet and backed out of the wedding. The woman went to the hotel to cancel the booking only to hear the bad news that she was only entitled to a 1300 dollar refund out of the 13000 dollars that was due for the meal payment. It was a binding contract. She had two options. She could forfeit the money she had paid for the down payment, or go ahead with the banquet. She decided to go ahead with the banquet. Ten years before she had been living in a homeless shelter. She had this wild notion that she would like to treat the down and outs of Boston to a night on the town. So, the Hyatt hotel in downtown Boston hosted a most unusual party. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken, in honour of the groom. She sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters throughout the city. Bag ladies,

vagrants, senior citizens on crutches and drug addicts were served by waiters in tuxedos. They danced the night away to big band music.

Jesus told a story of a wedding where the invitations were sent out, and nobody came. He ended his story by telling people to go out into the streets and bring in those who needed a party. Educated and uneducated. The up and outs and the down and outs. Bosses and workers. Maori and Pakeha. Chinese and Kiwis. Indians and Iraqis. Rich and poor. Young people and old people. He wanted Gods house to be filled, and Gods house is a very big house and it's not filled yet.

In this church in Colossae, the unthinkable had happened. Listen to what Paul writes to them. ***“Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” (Colossians 3:11)***

That scripture probably doesn't have the impact on us that it should, because we don't understand the context in which it was written. At the time Paul wrote that, there were huge divisions in society. One third of the people of Colossae were slaves. It was unthinkable that a slave would see himself as having equal status with a slave owning master. Slaves had no rights, and were regarded by their owners as living tools. A slave was regarded by a slave owner in the same way that a farmer would regard his tractor. A slave was just a means to get a job done. The Greeks in Colossae regarded Barbarians as the lowest of the low. The educated looked down on the uneducated as being the scum of the earth. Men regarded women as chattels who were there to serve them and meet their needs. Children were to be seen and not heard. There were races that had been traditional enemies for centuries and those racial divisions ran deep. The rich had nothing to do with the poor. The Jews looked down on the Greeks. Colossian society was about as divided as you could possibly get.

Yet Paul says ***“Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”*** That was a miracle. People who had been enemies for centuries found themselves sitting side by side as Christian brothers and sisters. Slaves and Masters were acting like members of the same family. The educated were helping the uneducated. The rich were treating the poor with dignity. Women and children were being valued. People of different races and cultures were respecting each others differences. It was unthinkable. It was a miracle.

When we were in Switzerland Lyn and I were part of three different home groups. We counted up the other day all the different nationalities that were part of those groups. [Picture] Africans from Uganda. A couple from Nigeria. Several Americans. A single African woman from Zambia. A young Mum from Rwanda. Two Chinese women. A South African. Several from Britain. Another from Mexico. A couple from South India. Someone from Armenia. Several Swiss. Two from Denmark. One from Finland. And us two Kiwis from the uttermost parts of the earth. And the ages ranged from under 20 to mid seventies. All these different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. All different Christian traditions. Baptist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Pentecostals, Reformed, Lutherans, Catholic, Methodist, Syriac Coptic, and lots who had no denominational affiliation. How did that work? It worked because Christ was all and in all.

Unity in a church like that doesn't come easily, just as unity in the Colossian church didn't come easily. But they were all becoming one because of what Jesus was doing in each one of them. If you read the New Testament you will find story after story of conflict in the church. Just like now, they found people who were difficult to get along with. But because of Jesus, they stuck with it, and learned to love one another.

Here are the instructions Paul gives this church. We need them too:
“Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity”.
(Colossians 3:12 – 14)

There are a growing number of Christians who are dropping out of the established church and meeting with like minded believers in small groups, and they are calling that their church. I believe in small groups, but small groups can often be made up of people who like each other. People we would naturally get along with. But we need to participate in Christian community that is bigger than our small group. Being part of a larger body of believers forces us to become family with people we wouldn't normally choose as our friends. The acid test of spiritual growth is our ability to love people we would not naturally love. Henri Nouwen describes Christian community this way; *"Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives."*

How Do We Begin To Love Difficult People?

1. Bear With Them.

The word that Paul uses means to put up with one another or to tolerate one another. The ultimate goal is that we are to love one another. But not all of us are capable of loving one another right off, so Paul is being very realistic here. This is the starting point. Endure them. Put up with them. Tolerate them. This is like Jesus command to love them, only with training wheels attached. This is for people who are not yet ready to solo. Don't try to push them out of the community. Don't pass judgement on them. Don't try to deliberately inflict pain on them. Don't gossip about them. Don't assume the worst about them. Bearing with difficult people will begin to change you. If you don't have a difficult person to practice on, ring the church office during the week and we will rent you one of the staff members!

2. Serve Them.

When was the last time you served that difficult person in your life? Loving feelings follow loving actions. If you behave in a certain way, your feelings will tend to follow the way you are acting. If you wait for the feelings to come before you act in servanthood ways you will wait forever. God doesn't ask us to build the whole building on our own. He asks us to put up the scaffolding so that he can climb on it to build the building. Try writing a note or letter to that difficult person expressing all the things you appreciate about them. Or speak to a third-party person one good thing about this person, without saying anything negative. Try that for a week and see what God does.

3. Pray For Them.

This command comes directly from Jesus. He told us to pray for those who persecute us. It's an important thing to do because it's very hard for us to pray for somebody and still stay mad at them. Ask God to bless them. Think of specific things you would like God to do for that person that would bless them, and ask God to do it. Don't ask God to change them. Ask him to change you.

4. See Them.

See beneath the surface. See them as God sees them. Ask God to show you their needs rather than their faults. You can do this because you are one of God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved. Because God wants you and has chosen you, you know what it is to be accepted. Therefore you have the ability to reach out and accept other people. Just as God has accepted and forgiven you, so he wants you to treat other people the same way.

Mary Anne Bird wrote a book called "The Whisper Test". In it she says, "I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, a disfigured face, misshapen lips, crooked nose and lopsided cheeks and garbled speech, and deaf in one ear. When I started school my classmates made it clear to me how I looked. When school mates asked "What happened to your lip?" I would always tell them I had fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident, than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside of my family could love me.

There was however a teacher who we all adored who was different. Mrs. Leonard was a short, round, happy lady. Every year we had a hearing test, and Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class. Finally, it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher, sitting at her desk, would whisper. We would have to repeat back what she whispered. She would say things like "The sky is blue" or "Do you have new shoes?" I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth. Seven words that changed my life. She whispered, "I wish you were my little girl." This little girl who had always thought of herself as a loser and a reject, found out that somebody wanted her, and it changed her life.

That's what God whispers to the human race. "I wish you belonged to me". That's what God wants us to shout to a world that knows so much rejection. All around us in our world are people who

need to see and hear the love and acceptance of God. Some of them are in our families. Some of them are in our church. Some of them are at work or school or university with us. We live next door to some of them. Who will be the voice of God to them and say "I wish you belonged to me?"