

# PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT ALL FEAR

*“Fear, anger, inflammatory rhetoric, violence around our country and around the world: Do we ever learn from the past?”*

**T**hese were my musings as I went to Mass on July 10, 2016. I prayed that the Scripture readings of the day and the homily would lift my spirit and reveal some hope, which I knew I desperately needed. I was not disappointed.



**BRIAN SMITH**

The Gospel passage for the day was the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), one that we in Catholic health care often use to demonstrate the type of lavish love and mercy we want to extend to our patients and residents, especially those who are poor and living on the margins. I remembered from my New Testament Scripture classes that the whole purpose of the literary device we know as “parable” is to surprise the listener. The meaning of Jesus’ lesson is found in the surprise of the story.

What is the surprise in the parable of the Good Samaritan? One might argue there are several surprises: One is the fact that the priest and the Levite, both religious leaders of the day, do not stop to assist the victim of the robbery. In those times, Samaritans and Jews were enemies, so another surprise is that the Samaritan stops and cares for the victim, “pouring vinegar and oil into

his wounds and placing him on his own beast” for transport to an inn. There, the Samaritan gives the innkeeper two silver pieces, the equivalent of two months’ wages, to continue taking care of the victim. The Samaritan promises to pay any additional costs when he stops at the inn on his way back.

All these details would have surprised Jesus’ audience, but the biggest surprise of all comes at the end of the story. Recall, Jesus tells the parable in response to the lawyer who, wanting to justify himself, asks, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan and then throws the question back to the lawyer: “Which of the people was neighbor to the man who fell in with robbers?” The lawyer answers, “The one who treated him with compassion.” In other words, the Samaritan.

For an official of the Jewish law to concede that it was a Samaritan who showed the most compassion and was most a neighbor to the victim — that would have sent shock waves through the crowd. If the story were being told by Jesus today in our society, who might he substitute for the Samaritan in the story? The story’s point, its shock value, is that our neighbor is not always who we think it is. Our neighbor is not the person we know and like and want to invite to our parties. In God’s kingdom, our neighbor includes the poor, the outcasts and those who are not like us and often make us feel uncomfortable. Now that is a surprise we need to sit with!

The Holy Spirit was doing some good work in me when I brought my attention back to what the priest was saying. I confess sometimes I hit pause on the preacher, do my own exegesis of the passage and then reconnect to the homilist. I figure

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with two of us working on the passage, we have a better chance of getting it right.

The priest was connecting attitudes toward the Samaritan to current attitudes towards groups of people whom we may distrust, fear or try to avoid. The priest and I were in sync, the Holy Spirit had brought us to the same point at the same time. Then came my surprise — a connection I had never thought of.

The priest paused. “I had not planned on saying this, and I don’t even remember the exact chapter and verse, but this just came to me,” he said.

It was like those moments when Pope Francis goes off script, and you know this is the Holy Spirit speaking uncensored.

“What is coming to me,” the priest said, “is the passage, ‘Love has no room for fear; rather, perfect love casts out all fear.’ (I looked it up when I got home, and it is 1 John 4:18.)

The priest put aside his notes and spoke from the heart. “I know we are all afraid at what has been happening around the world and within our own country these past few years,” he said. “There is mistrust and even hatred in our world. But the only thing that will conquer fear and mistrust is perfect love. The cycle of mistrust, fear, hatred and violence will not be broken by purchasing more guns or bigger guns, or through incarcerating more people for longer periods of time, or by building walls or barriers to keep people who are different than us from entering our country. None of this will ever work. Only God’s love, which calls us to be neighbors to everyone, can heal us. Not our human love, but God’s perfect love. Perfect love conquers fear. I do not have perfect love, but God does. We will only break this cycle through God’s healing love.”

You could have heard a pin drop. The congregation knew truth had been spoken and that we needed to let this graced moment soak in and pray for God’s healing love.

As I have continued pondering these thoughts and feelings, I have wondered: “How may I love more perfectly?” Reading 1 John 4 helped answer that question.

“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever

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loves God must also love his brother.”

We only are able to love more perfectly because God has loved us first. God’s love is perfect love. God’s love is totally selfless, as demonstrated by the fact he sent his only son into the world to save us from our sins.

Jesus showed us time and time again what perfect love looks like. It is a love that is inclusive of all, with a special care for the poor and marginalized. It is a love of neighbor that recognizes that my neighbor is everyone, not just those who look like me, think like me and pray like me. It is a love that does not count the cost of caring for another person.

We need to shine a light on the countless examples of selfless, sacrificing love taking place every day in our facilities. We need to let this love radiate from our facilities into our communities and into the world. This is perfect love, and this, alone, will cast away all of our fears.

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