

Giving until it hurts

In her address to all the leaders gathered at the annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington DC in 1994, Mother Teresa asked this question: Do you give until it hurts? She said this 8 times throughout her speech. She was drawing on the fundamental law of Christian life. The law is that the only way to gain life is to give it away. Mother Teresa was an icon of this kind of giving, this kind of love, this kind of life.

In the Gospel today John states that “having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end.” Jesus loved to the end!! There was nothing left of himself when Jesus in his humanity took his last breath on the Cross. There was nothing left of Jesus because he spent himself in loving. He then gave us a final commandment. If you are to be my disciples then you are to love one another as I have loved you (John 13.34-35).

Real, authentic, true love requires sacrifice. Jesus showed us over and over again in his ministry, in his teaching and ultimately in his life and death and resurrection what this love looks like. Jesus' love was a committed love. He leaves no doubt in our minds that we have a God who loves us faithfully and totally.

In the second reading from the Book of Revelation we are given a beautiful vision of what happens when we love each other like Jesus. We are told that we become a community. We become the Church. This church is like a beautiful bride adorned to meet her husband. Who is the husband? Jesus! We the bride become this New Jerusalem, a new city. What a tremendous vision of hope, of vibrant life, of peace of joy. No sorrow, no weeping, no pain. Just peace, communion, joy, God – heaven. Even death will be no more.

Yes, the world is thirsting for this peace, for this joy, for this rest. There is so much that looks dark – the wars, the poverty, the racism, the disease. There is a very big circle of concern that we can get very depressed about. But we are here in Markham where it is relatively safe and most if not all of us here in this church are okay. So, God has planted our church here. This is where St. Patrick's Parish exists – here in Markham. Not in Africa, not in Asia, not in Europe but in Canada. And we have been blessed with a lot. We are not fighting famine, earthquakes or tsunamis. Yes, we are fighting a disease. But things are even improving a lot on that front too. How can we be instruments of God's love here in Markham? This is where God wants to dwell. He desires to make his home right here in Markham.

How important is that to us? God has loved us so much that he has given to us his only begotten Son so that we might not perish but have life in its abundance. How important is that to us? Are we really committed to building this vibrant loving community who live for God and others? Do we really want people in Markham to meet Jesus, to form a friendship with him, to be changed for the better by him? There are literally thousands and thousands of people who attend our Catholic schools, who live in our neighbourhoods, who go to the same shops and fitness clubs as we do and yet they do not have what we have. They lack the most important thing of all. They lack faith, a faith that believes in the saving power of Christ to wipe away every tear and do away with even Death itself. They have never had the door of faith opened for them (Acts 14.27).

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Do we really believe that by joining this parish community, people can be saved; they can be strengthened by love? If it is important to us, are we willing to build up this parish community in a sacrificial way? Are we willing to give until it hurts? Do we love like Jesus – to the end? This after all is one of the main reasons why we need to fund the mission of St. Patrick's Parish. Many, many people have not had the door of faith opened for them. They might even be right here in this church today!

We need to bring God's love into the world. When people see us loving, what they see is this heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. They say, "Haha, yes, I have found what I am looking for. I can come here and join a community of people who know what real authentic love is all about and they know what it is because they live it. They are not just talking about it, they are living it." To become this vibrant, loving community takes resources. It does not happen spontaneously. It takes tremendous sacrifice on all fronts. But, one of the main ways that each of us can support this community in its mission is to give money. Pause... Yes, money. Giving money in this manner becomes a spiritual exercise of building up this community so that people can be saved. Young people are saved when they find friendships with peers, discover faith, share their struggles, become firmly rooted in their Christian identity – all through what we call Youth Ministry.

People are saved when they take the risk to take Alpha and discover that a living, personal relationship with God is possible. People are saved when we meet together in small study groups and learn about the history of Indigenous peoples and start on a road of healing and reconciliation. People are saved when the lonely and the sick are visited and prayed with. People are saved when they celebrate the sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation. People are saved when they are accompanied by faith leaders in our community and commit themselves to living a Christ-centred life. People are saved when there is a physical church building they can be welcomed into. The work of salvation is absolutely the work of God. But, he asks us to partner with him. It takes concrete resources, it takes trained, paid personnel, it takes all kinds of communication media. It takes money to support this. This is one big reason why we give. It is a concrete way in which we say, yes, I am committed to loving people in my community. I am committed to opening the door of faith so that other people can come here to be loved. And, my giving is something I have thought about and it is a sign of my commitment to this particular community of St. Patrick's. I am thankful and blessed to be part of this mission of building this community of love. This is why I give. I am committed.

My friends in Christ, this is why passing the basket is not the best way of collecting our commitments. It might even lead us away from making a commitment. This is why I keep encouraging monthly giving through PAG and Donate Now. This is why it is good when people put their name to their giving. This is why it is good for people to put their name on their envelope and intentionally put it in the basket at the entrance. It does not just generate a tax receipt. It is a concrete way to say that I am committed. I have thought about what I can give. I have prayed about what I can give and this is the sacrifice that I can make to regularly support the mission of our parish.

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This is why we give. Yes, it hurts. But it is a good pain. It is a pain that leads to life, that builds up this community of love we call St. Patrick's. And we know, again, the law of giving. God always gives us back immeasurably more than what we give.

When we discussed sacrificial giving on our pastoral team, Silvana, our lay pastoral associate, brought up the example of her mother. Yolanda passed away just before the pandemic. She was in and out of hospital for the last few months of her life. She could not get to church because she could hardly stand. But, she felt a part of her church community because parishioners would check in on her. Some would bring her Communion. She was always sure to send in her church donation. In the hospital, when Silvana visited her, Yolanda would put money in her church envelope, sign it, and make sure her donation was given to her parish, even though she was in pain and day to day living was a huge effort. You can see, for Yolanda schooled in sacrificial giving, this was her way of living life in its fulness. She knew in the depths of her heart that mysteriously she was receiving way more than she was giving. So, her gift was free, it was faithful, it was all she had and it bore much fruit in the life of her parish. She was loving like Christ. She was loving to the end.

Even though she was hurting, Yolanda was giving! This was not lost on her children and extended family. When it came time for her funeral, the priest was overwhelmed with how much Yolanda's family donated to the church. Giving begets giving. That community grew from the sacrifice of Yolanda's giving.

This is what we want for our community. Intentional giving is a concrete sign of the love that God brings into the world through Jesus. It is a concrete sign of God making his home with us.

This is why we give until it hurts. It is Christian love. With and through Jesus, our sacrificial giving is transformed into an abundance of life. It glorifies God, it opens the door of faith for those who have never met Jesus. Our community becomes a sign of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city where God makes all things new.

In conclusion, I invite you to take a minute right now to think about the money you give to our parish community. Calling upon the Holy Spirit for guidance, ask yourself: Is my giving a sign of my commitment of love to this parish? Am I giving until it hurts? If it does, then rest assured that you have found love and you have found life.

