

The Revolutionary Love of Jesus

May 8, 2025, was a momentous day for Roman Catholics and for all Christians. Quite unexpectedly, the first American was elected Pope. Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, a Chicago native, a member of the religious Order of St. Augustine, a missionary bishop to Peru, and now a Vatican official, was elected on the fourth ballot to lead 1.4 billion Catholics – by far the largest Church in the world.

After his election, Pope Leo XIV, as he has chosen to be called, stepped onto the Vatican balcony, and addressed the waiting crowd and all the world. He got right to the heart of the Gospel when he said: “This is the peace of the risen Christ, a disarming and humble and persevering peace. It comes from God. God who loves all of us, without limits or conditions.” He then repeated, “God loves us, all of us, evil will not prevail. We are in the hands of God.”

God loves all of us, declared Pope Leo, and therefore, we are to love one another. This is the essence of the Christian ethic. On the night before he died, Jesus told his disciples: *“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”* Christians are to love as Jesus loves us.

Now, of course, the question for us who live in the 21st century is this: What kind of love does Jesus have for us that we now need to show others?

As I read my New Testament, I think Jesus has a revolutionary love that is accepting. Jesus accepts people where they are in their lives, and not where he wants them to be. That’s a hard love to put into practice but not impossible.

The woman caught in the act of adultery was going to be stoned to death by her male accusers. Jesus didn’t condone her sin, but neither did he condemn her to death.

Then there was the woman at the well: guilty because of the way she was living – she was on her fifth husband who really wasn’t her husband. Jesus did not condemn her either. Instead, he began where she was and then gave her a way to experience a new life. In other words, Jesus accepted her as she was, but didn’t leave as she was.

A short tax collector by the name of Zacchaeus climbed up a tree to see Jesus pass by and Jesus noticed him. It changed his life, and he agreed to pay back four times the amount that he had defrauded from people.

Jesus accepts us as we are but doesn’t leave us as we are. He has the kind of love that says, “We will begin where you are in life, with what you have been given in life.” Jesus never said to anyone, “You’d better become something better than you are before I will have anything to do with you.” No! Jesus loves us just as we are and through his love, we become better than we are.

Early in my life as a priest, I concluded that all-inclusive love is the hope of the world. Much like Pope Leo XIV, I came to believe that our God loves everyone, everywhere and without exception. In the end, what matters is not how we think about God, but the way we love God, and we love God by loving people. The saintly Jesuit scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin may have said it best: “It is impossible to love Christ without loving others, and it is impossible to love others without moving nearer to Christ.”

Jesus has a revolutionary love that is accepting. But second, Jesus has a revolutionary love that is sacrificial. Christian love means seeking others’ good first, making the world a better place for others, helping others to reach their potential as human beings, and moving beyond our comfort zone to respond to the pain and suffering in the world. This requires sacrifice, self-giving, generosity of spirit and a heart for people, especially, the weak, the hurting and the marginalized – the people who for whatever reason are unable to help themselves.

There is a story about a man who became lost in his travels and fell into a dark, slimy pit. He tried to climb out of the pit but couldn’t. Confucius came along, saw the man’s predicament, and said, “Poor fellow, if he’d listened to me, he never would have fallen into the pit,” and he went on his way. Next, Buddha observed the man in the pit and said, “Poor fellow, if he could pull himself out of the pit, I would teach him the Eight Laws of Enlightenment.” And he went on his way too. Then Mohammed came by and said to the man, “Alas, it is the will of Allah.” Finally, Jesus appeared and saw the man helpless and hopeless, unable to pull himself out of the pit. So, he jumped down into the pit and lifted the man out.

That is the kind of love Jesus has for us. He enters our pits and lifts us out. He gives his life to save our life. He doesn’t just teach us about salvation, but he saves us. He doesn’t just tell us what to do; he does it. His is not only words; it is action. Or to put it another way, love is not a noun but a verb in the Christian life. We love when we show love to others.

On our recent cruise through Scandinavia, Heather and I met a lovely Australian couple who lived about an hour north of Brisbane. Maxine is eighty years old but still active in her church and doing good in the world. She told us how she and her friend were raising money to build a clean water system for people in a rural Indonesian community. They have made several visits to the community to help organize and monitor the project.

I asked her why she does it, and her answer was simple: “I’m a Christian.” More than half the members of the community she is helping are not Christians, but that doesn’t matter. Clean water saves lives, and she is committed to providing it.

At age 80 she is still going strong – God bless her! I hope she has many years left to do good.

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice by dying for us. Most of us will never die for Jesus, but we can live for him by extending ourselves for others – to care for the poor and needy, to

minimize pain and suffering, and to build bridges that divide people one from another. We can do that in our own way and according to our own ability, but all of us can sacrifice to bring the light of Jesus into the dark places of our world. After all, that's what Christians do.

The revolutionary love of Jesus is accepting and sacrificial. And finally, it is unconditional. It is one thing to love someone who loves you, but how do we love someone who is unlovable?

I remember in university speaking with Jesuit priest George Anderson who was a much-respected Catholic Chaplain at Rikers' Island, New York City's notorious jail where thousands of prisoners, including some of the most vicious and hardened, were held in detention pending trial. I said to the priest, "You must really love people to do this kind of work." But the priest said to me, "Love for people wouldn't keep me here one hour. It's love for God that keeps me here."

In other words, we are to love people not because they are necessarily lovable or even likable. No, we are to love them because we love God and loving them is what God wants us to do. We can love others, only because God has first loved us.

And yes, I know... it is difficult to love some people. There are mean, nasty, and cruel people in this world, but God gives us the grace to love them even when we do not like them.

Some of us may have seen the film adaptation of the book *Dead Man Walking* by Sister Helen Prejean. In the film we experience Sister Helen's death row chaplaincy of Matthew Poncelet, a young prisoner convicted of rape and murder. Poncelet did heinous acts in his life. He is not a nice person, and yet he dies with someone who loves him. Just prior to his execution Sister Jean tells him, "Just look at me. I want the last thing you see on this earth to be the face of love." And it is indeed the love of Christ that he sees in her eyes as he takes his last breath.

Most of us are familiar with the Ten Commandments. One of those commandments says, "You shall not murder." This is God's law, to be sure. But on the night before he died, Jesus gave us a new commandment – to love one another as he loves us. Love – the revolutionary love of Jesus: accepting, sacrificial and unconditional.

I was an Army Reserve Chaplain back in the late 1980s. I will never forget a story told to us in our training. During World War I, a chaplain went to see one of the wounded. He could easily tell that the man's wound was going to be fatal. He did not have long to live. The chaplain asked, "May I read to you from the Bible?" The young man said, "I'm cold," so the chaplain took off his trench coat and carefully put it around the boy. Again, the chaplain said, "I'd like to read to you from the Bible." The boy said, "I am thirsty," so the chaplain put down the Bible and got out his canteen and carefully gave him something to drink. Then he said, "Can I read you now from the Bible?" He said, "My legs are hurting," so the chaplain lay down the Bible again and carefully straightened out

those crooked legs, making sure the trench coat was tucked around him again. “Now can I read to you from the Bible?” he asked.

The soldier said, “If there is anything in that Bible that caused you to do what you’ve done for me, yes. Please read to me from that part of the Bible.”

Love is the litmus test of a Christian. People are looking at us. They are looking and trying to decide if the kind of God who is at the center of our lives is the kind of God that they would want at the center of their lives. When they see us, do they see the love of Jesus?

To quote Pope Leo once again in his homily at his inauguration Mass: “Brothers and sisters, this is the hour for love! The heart of the Gospel is the love of God that makes us brothers and sisters. ... With the light and strength of the Holy Spirit, let us build a Church founded on God’s love, a sign of unity, a missionary Church that opens its arms to the world, proclaims the word, allows itself to be made ‘restless’ by history, and becomes a leaven of harmony for humanity. Together, as one people, as brothers and sisters, let us walk towards God and love one another.”

May it be so, dear God, may it be so!

The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi

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Text – John 13:31-35

Easter 5, C

Advent Episcopal Church, Sun City West, AZ