

## CAN WE LOVE LIKE JESUS?

A Meditation on *John 13: 31-35* by the Rev. Shannan R. Vance-Ocampo

Sunday May 2, 2010

On the Occasion of the Plainfield Presbyterian Mission Group Combined Worship

I need to confess to you this morning that it was very hard for me to not get depressed, deflated, and dejected this past week. So much of what went on in the world around us, let alone the individual suffering I know about in people's lives as a Pastor left me feeling this week as though I was out of emotional and even spiritual steam. Like many of you I find myself watching the increasingly negative information about the catastrophic oil spill that continues without an end in sight with horror. I have found myself thinking about and praying for the local communities on the Gulf Coast; communities that have been tested so much over recent years, who are just beginning to put their lives back together. So many of these people depend on the waters in the Gulf of Mexico for their livelihood, and once again they are being asked to face an uncertain and potentially economically debilitating time. I have found myself as well thinking about the beautiful animals of that part of the world, wondering about them, praying that they will not be harmed or made sick. Our sisters and brothers on the Gulf Coast are once again in the position of needing our prayers this morning.

But I must confess you to you that the thing that has upset me the most this past week is the recently passed immigration law, SB1070 in Arizona. As we have been hearing all week, the law allows for individual persons to be required to show proof that they are either a U.S. citizen or in the United States legally at the time of arrest or being stopped by the police. For your first arrest and offense it is either a \$500 fine or six months in jail, and the penalties increase from there. The law also gives citizens of Arizona the right to sue any state or local municipality or agency they feel is not holding up the law to its fullest extent. The law also makes it a crime to give "shelter" or "help" to anyone who is undocumented. For that you can also face jail time. If you are transporting someone who is undocumented in your personal vehicle and this is found out through something as simple as a routine traffic stop that is a class one criminal misdemeanor on your record.<sup>1</sup>

If we were living in the State of Arizona right now, when this law goes into effect in July, I would venture to say that all of the clergy that are here today, including myself would be in immediate violation of this law and subject to arrest. We all, as part of our calling as Pastors helped people who are undocumented. I consider myself a law-abiding citizen—ultimately, the laws of our land are secondary to me when compared to the law of God. Many of us sitting here today for one reason or another would also be in violation of this law. Is this the kind of world you want to live in? Are these the kinds of laws you would be OK with following? I would not be. I know my husband would not be. If I was living in Arizona right now I would continue doing my ministry in the way I have done it since the day I was ordained nearly nine years ago, and the way I conducted my life before I was ordained. And if I got arrested in the pursuit of that ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so be it. We need to be in prayer for our sisters and brothers in ministry in Arizona who as of July can be arrested for doing ministry the way I and my colleagues here today practice it. I know many people in ministry in Arizona, and I can assure you, they are in violation of this law and they are part of our Presbyterian family. Even more than that we need to be in prayer, and we

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arizona\\_SB1070](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arizona_SB1070)

need to figure out a way to effectively advocate for our sisters and brothers in Christ in Arizona whose lives are being torn apart by this new law and who now live in even greater fear than they were before. I must confess to you today that I have had many moments of anger this past week, as I know many of you have as well. We need to help each other. This is a test for us too, that we keep our mind and our spirit focused on Jesus, on his message of peace, justice, and love. It is easy to go to the place of vilifying other people when we get into issues like this that are complicated and filled with so much emotion. I know this because that's the place I have been in and out of this past week, and it is a spiritual struggle and we need to be honest with ourselves—that these situations test us emotionally, but even more they test us spiritually. How we respond will be a sign to the world around us about how serious we are about our faith, if we are the kind of Christians other people can trust.

Let me tell you a story from my own life. I have shared this with some of you already, so if you are hearing it again, I apologize. As you know, my husband, Juan Gabriel is an immigrant to this country; he came here from Colombia to marry me ten years ago this past week. So, we understand some of the fear, some of the worry. We also realize that as we went through the process of immigration we had all the tools at our disposal: a lawyer, a spouse who was a U.S. citizen, people who would advocate for us. These are gifts that so many people do not have. Juan is constantly trying to figure out ways to help and support other people who are struggling with immigration, because he knows how hard it is, and he wants to help. About six weeks ago, Juan, Sofia, and I were driving home in the evening from a friend's house. Juan's cell phone rang. On the other line end of the line was one of Juan's employees (he helps mostly Latino workers at our local supermarket chain navigate getting a job, staying employed, and dealing with their paperwork). Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE was doing a sweep in Red Bank, and some of their friends were getting picked up. Some of the workers were afraid to walk to work that evening. I kept on driving; listening to the conversation Juan was having. At the same time my daughter, Sofia, who is seven-years old piped up from the backseat, "Mommy, what is going on?" She has met many of the people Juan works with, and she could tell from Juan's side of the conversation that that something wasn't right. I wanted to say to her "nothing" and to reassure her, but if you know my daughter, you know that she listens to everything, and wouldn't just accept my evasions. She would keep on pestering me until I answered her questions. So, I explained briefly, with as few details as possible about what was happening. Her next question stunned me. She said, "Mommy, will anyone come and take Papi away?" She asked me that question six weeks ago, and I am still haunted by it today.

We need spiritual help.

We especially need spiritual help when for so many of us the news around us, and even life itself creates so much fear and tension. As I have struggled myself this past week, I have found solace in preparing for worship today, and also in going back and reading some of the great spiritual giants of our time, especially the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. on the topics of love and nonviolence. Our Gospel reading today is very short, but in just five verses, it offers lots of information and invites many questions. It is sandwiched in-between the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, and the prediction by Jesus of Peter's denials. And in the middle of all of this turmoil, pain and confusion are the comforting words of Jesus, "...*little children, I am with you only a little longer...[but] I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" Seems easy. All we have

to do is love other people, and as we love them, everyone around us will know that we follow Jesus? If we love, everything will be all right.

Unfortunately, loving like Jesus is not easy. It is the hardest kind of love to achieve because we are not just asked to say if someone asks us: “Well I love that sinner, but I hate his or her sin.” That sort of idea is suggested all the time today, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” I have never been a fan of that phrase because it makes things seem just too easy, as though love and forgiveness can just be an exercise of our brains, something we can remain detached from; rather than the hard work of loving with our hearts or our spirits, which is a much more difficult proposition. Instead we are asked by Jesus to have agape-love, what Martin Luther King describes in his book *Stride Towards Freedom* as “love seeking to preserve and create community...insisting on community even when one seeks to break it.”<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King reminds us that when someone goes about the business of trying to break down community or worse yet, destroy it, that they are in the business of something evil, because they have chosen to work against God’s created order. As we look at Jesus we realize that God will go to any length to choose us, to choose community, to choose relationship. The Cross was hard. Having Judas betray him, knowing that Peter would deny him in his hour of greatest need was not easy for Jesus. Maybe he saw those things coming in his own life and was somewhat prepared for it, but Jesus was as human as you and I are. Even when we think we have prepared ourselves for something unpleasant we know is coming at us, it is still hard, it can still rip us apart and destroy us. These actions must have caused Jesus great pain. They must have given him pause; they must have made him struggle. But yet, Jesus keeps on going, he keeps his eye on the ball and what he has been sent by God to proclaim and embody: nothing less than agape-love, the building up of community, the breaking down of human barriers caused by sin.

Part of the message of Jesus and the reason why we understand Martin Luther King to be a prophet of our time is because they both understood that we can have great violence done to our spirits. Others can harm and hurt us, and cause wounds that last a lifetime. But even greater than this is the spiritual violence we can do to ourselves if we allow our lives to be ruled by hate and by fear. This is why the central lesson of Jesus was agape-love. Not easy love, but agape-love, love of community, love of people, love even in a time of wounded-ness and violence. When we start to hate, when we start to vilify others—then we have crossed over into the land of sin and separation, and have become no better than the people who are hurting us. That is always my ongoing spiritual struggle and I suspect it is yours as well. Setting aside my personal politics and theology for a moment, I am a mother. My child is now asking me questions like, “Why do people not like Colombians?” or, “Is someone going to come and pick up Papi” and has come home from school to report to me that some of the children in her class have said racist things about our President. Forget that I’m a Pastor, that I’m a leader. As a mom I want to take all of those things out of her life. As a mom I want to protect my child. As I mom I want those children who say those things expelled from school. As a mother I want to build a cocoon of safety and security around her. This is why I had such a hard time this week. I do not like injustice, and what I see in this new law in Arizona is way too harsh and is unjust. The truth is for me and for all of us is that we cannot shield our children from these things. My daughter will hear more racist comments in her life. More laws like the one in Arizona will be passed if fear and hatred continue to run amok in our beloved

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<sup>2</sup> James Washington, ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York, New York: HarperCollins Press, 1986. pages 16-20 in the essay: [An Experiment in Love](#).

country. But we are people who follow Jesus. We are people who follow agape-love. It isn't easy love, it is hard love. I believe we are going to need each other a lot more in the weeks, months, and years to come. We're going to have to gather together for worship more often than once a year if we are to keep ourselves and the community we keep with each other strong. We're going to need to learn new ways to talk to each other, to work on that inner transformation of spirit that Jesus calls us to, and then find creative and nonviolent ways to share it with the world around us. There are not many places where church communities as diverse and different as the five that are gathered here this morning come together regularly to mediate on God's Word and do mission together. But we are growing one. We want to do a joint mission trip of our churches together next summer to build up our community. We need to get together more often for fellowship, for Bible study, for youth group, for church school. If we can break our barriers down, then we can show agape-love to the hurting and sinful world around us. We can support each other with agape-love as we find ourselves feeling low and out of spiritual steam. We can offer our children an alternative to the violence of spirit that happens to them in school and on the playground.

As the lines to the famous hymn go:

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored  
We will work with each other, we will work side by side  
And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride  
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand  
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land  
**And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, by our love,  
and they'll know we are Christians by our love.***

Amen? Amen.