

Pentecost 18, Proper 21  
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## Falling in Love

I learned a long time ago. You don't become good by trying. You become good by falling in love.

For example, tortillas are not Ecuadorian food. If you want a good tortilla in Ecuador you have to go to a Mexican restaurant. Same is true about with tacos, burritos, birria, mole, enchiladas and all those foods that we know so well. Growing up I did not eat those foods. I ate fried plantain, rice and fried pork, beef cut really thin and grilled, and always, always a plate of soup to start every meal but breakfast. So, when we moved to south Texas, I had some catching up to do. Tortillas were the side dish for everything you ordered in a restaurant. Tortillas—the standard question like around here—corn or wheat, went with everything. I also discovered tacos, burritos, birria, mole, enchiladas and all those foods we know so well.

I learned to eat them, because that is what the people in my congregation ate. But tortillas—I eat tortillas all the time now and I'm far from south Texas. They are plate, silverware and main carb all in one. They are easy, tasty, and go with—well, about anything and everything. I think I could eat a pancake with a tortilla! I don't eat tortillas now because the people in my congregation eat tortillas. I eat tortillas because I fell in love with them, especially fresh off the comal, flavored with love from the palms that formed them.

There is an idea out there that the Church exists to make people good. In one sense that is totally false. The church is not a school in citizenship or good manners. Those standards are culturally defined, and the Gospel transcends culture. The Gospel rather critiques citizenship and good manners, because sometimes they can be profoundly unjust, and who best to say so but a voice that is not beholden to the system.

However, in another way it is completely true. Like learning to eat Mexican food because my congregation was Mexican, the practices of the faith are things we commit ourselves to doing. Whether we like them or not is rather immaterial. We do them because we know the effect they have on a person. They draw us close to God. Why should we draw close to God? Because we have fallen in, or I could say, fallen into love. So, like falling in love with tortillas, the Gospel gives something—or I should say—someone to love with, and in loving that Someone, we become good people. That Someone is Jesus.

You don't become good by trying. You become good by falling in love. The Gospel gives us the King of love to love.

Take the readings for today, and you will see the core of this idea running through them all. In the Old Testament lesson, the people of Israel are out in the wilderness, far from

anything they know. They are eating manna, bread from heaven, morning, noon and night. It sustains them, and in parts we skipped this morning, it is described as rather tasty. But it's all they have, so they get a bit grumpy. They complain to Moses, who complains to God. "Did I give birth to these people that I must carry them around as a nursing mother?"

God has been pretty clear all along that God gave birth to this people, so, God says, "OK, you don't have to carry this load alone. I'll give you helpers (even if Eldad and Medad don't come to the meeting.)" I can almost hear God saying, "OK, Moses, I've worked through you all this time, but now I want direct access. In other words, "I want them to fall in love with their God."

This story echoes another place in Torah that commands, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength."

In the lesson from James, we get another look at the same idea. Are you suffering? Pray. Are you happy? Sing songs of joy. Are you sick? Call the elders for anointing. Prayer works. It's a way of connecting up with a God who loves us and wants us to interact, to be in relationship, and if you're in relationship with God it takes place in your relationships with one another. Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Not two loves, but one love. Fall in love with God, and live out that love with one another.

In the Gospel lesson, someone is casting out demons in Jesus' name, and reminiscent of the lesson from Sacred History where Joshua thought Moses should restrain Eldad and Medad, the disciples think this stranger is a problem, and they're not happy. But Jesus isn't upset. "Whoever is not against us is for us. No deed of goodness done in the name of Christ will go without its reward. So don't go putting things in the way of yourself. Whatever about you keeps you from that kind of loving direct access needs to go. Conversely, whatever helps needs to be kept. And don't go putting things in the way of others, either. Others are simply falling in love with God, This is what I want. Why should YOU be the problem?"

And of course, like in James, this is all lived out in community. "Have salt in yourselves and live at peace with one another." As all of you seek to fall in love with God, fall in love with one another as a way of expressing it.

How do you fall in love with Jesus? First, you have to find him. I recently watched a video by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She is Nigerian and an eloquent speaker and author. She spoke of the danger of the single story. (I'm as guilty as anyone.) We hear one story about someone or a people, and in our minds, we make that one story the story of that person's whole life, or that peoples' whole experience. Single stories give rise to stereotypes and classifications that strip people of depth and history, passion and glory. Multiple stories flesh people out, give them depth and humanity.

Everybody has more than one story. Every people has more than one story. Loving Jesus means looking for him in every story. Sometimes our stories about Jesus are

painful, sometimes they are mysterious, or glorious or even somewhat mundane and disappointing. Your stories are not my stories, though they often walk side by side, and we can hold hands as we tell them. When we see Jesus in one another's stories we walk together hand in hand. Our Small Groups are safe places to tell these stories and from what I hear, people are falling in love with the Jesus they discover in themselves—and in one another.

The spiritual life is about love before it is about being good. We don't become good by trying. We become good by falling in love. Fall in love with Jesus. Jesus is to be found in the rainbow of stories each person lives. Find him there and you will be good to the person in whom you find him. Jesus can be found in the stories of every people. Find him there and you will strive for justice and peace.