Do you love people? A question for pastors

by Peter W. Marty in the October 4, 2011 issue



The last question the pastor asked was "Peter, do you love people?" He was interviewing me for my first parish assignment and was about 30 years older than I was. The question unsettled me. It seemed disingenuous. It felt like a patronizing trap. I think my reply to him was some variation of "You bet!" Whatever my response, it almost certainly displayed more eagerness than depth, more cheer than nuance. What I do remember is that I was annoyed by the inference that it was possible to be preparing for ordination in the church and yet be unloving of people.

This pastor judged me suitable for placement in a congregation. Perhaps I said "You bet!" with special gravity. Or maybe something else in the interview indicated potential. Whatever the case, the do-you-love-people question has never left my mind. It has been rolling around in my head now for a quarter century—and it's the best thing that pastor could have asked me.

After peeling back the layers of that question, I have concluded that the only relationship worth having with a congregation is one that requires extensive use of the word *love* to describe its fullness. Yes, a love of people seems like the most obvious component in a parish pastor's life. But it's not. "Love in theory" is prevalent. We're all experts at talking or theorizing about love, beginning with our own families. But in relationships with those we care most about, we remain clumsy in the exercise of love. We fail often, mistaking good intentions for embracing the mystery of that other one's heart.

As a pastor, I never want to confuse the love of being around people with the actual love of people. There is a big difference between experiencing people and taking the time and energy to know the depth, intricacy and holiness of their lives.

Theological education cannot assume responsibility for teaching this love or the desire required for its expression. No curriculum can teach one how to love unlovable people who, by the way, are a part of every congregation. Seminarians are taught how to exegete scripture, not people. When students finally get around to studying matters of practical theology, often late in their degree program, they are itching to discover the skills, tasks and functions that go with being a pastor. Having mastered biblical hermeneutics, they want to know how to hold a chalice and craft a budget.

What often surfaces in the all-important interview for a first parish assignment is an enthusiasm for utilizing everything one has learned in training. A candidate who says, "I am looking for the best place to put my gifts to work, and I am really eager to share what I feel to be my calling" will till a very different field from the candidate who says, "I can't wait to fall in love with this congregation and learn all kinds of things from the people in it."

Loving people in a congregation—that would be all of them—requires something special of a pastor. The requirement is not love in the abstract. The commitment is something more particular than, say, a Chicago Bears fan loving all other Bears fans.

So what is behind this pastoral desire to treasure other people and take their daily lives to heart? Here are my observations from years of ministry lived in the shadow of the question that was drilled into my heart: "Peter, do you love people?"

First, a pastor must decide that the people of his or her congregation truly matter—that they are worth the personal energy expended on their behalf. This is more than putting up with people who consider the church their second home. It asks for the gift of compassion and a keenly observant eye for noticing. Parishioners have no way of convincing their pastor to care about them. Just as a sailor reads the wind or a surfer reads the surf, a pastor must read the contours of individual lives within a congregation.

I might ask myself, for example, "Am I interested in the complications that go with the daily routines of these people under my care? Do I really want to get to know them in more than a superficial way? Can I imagine the very different worlds they inhabit and tune into those worlds when I'm with them? Am I willing to care personally for them in the midst of all that might preoccupy their minds, worry their hearts or delight their souls?" A pastor who can answer these questions in the affirmative is on the road to a meaningful partnership in ministry. In loving others we do not merely give of ourselves; we also receive energy and insight for living our own lives more fully. Long ago I decided that I am likely to learn more from the people in my congregation than they will ever learn from me.

Second, we need to love people as they are, not as we wish they were. None of this "if only" stuff in ministry. "If only she would buy into the strategic plan." "If only he would open his wallet more freely." Conditional love is not biblical love. Toleration of another is not the warmth of affection. If the ministry of a church is alive and vibrant, the members within it will always be in the process of becoming more than they presently are. This is its own delight. Pastors who enjoy a loving identification with their people will find themselves putting the joys and interests of these people ahead of their own. Everyone comes out on top when there is this "priority for the other." It sounds rather Jesuslike, come to think of it.

I  have discovered a morning clue for detecting whether the day's ministry is calibrated in the direction of generous love or tedious function. If, when driving to work, I find myself thinking randomly about various people in our congregation with some excitement instead of pondering the tasks on a to-do list, chances are good that it will be a fulfilling day. It may also prove to be a very faithful day, at least in

terms of rising to that calling I hold dearly before God.

Third, we should not confuse the gift of interpersonal skills with having a pastoral heart for people. Interpersonal skills are a key to good ministry, but they are no substitute for the reverence that goes with casting one's lot among this strange menagerie of people called a congregation. The art of embracing other people, including individuals very much unlike ourselves, does not belong to a bullet point on a pastor's job description. It is part of one's character, formed by the grace of the Savior's love and molded through daily prayer.

Fourth, love is its own reward. It is not a means to an end. Love must never be exercised to get somebody to do something. As a pastor, I need to see people for the depth of their humanity, for the colorful surprise that God has tucked into their breath, and not for their perceived value to the church's ministry or to me personally. As Mother Teresa put it, "The success of loving is in the loving; it is not in the result of loving."

Fifth, love grows in depth over time. Just as those in a marriage enrich the texture of their togetherness with each new experience of their shared life, so we in the church discover the full meaning of our love for one another only over the course of time. If I say, "I love you," to another human being, I cannot really say this in a way that suggests I've perfected that love. Rather, the words remind both of us that there is yet more love to be discovered through our precious bond.

Finally, cherishing the people of a congregation requires a deep, inner desire if it is to surface as a pastoral priority. Loving a body of people does not happen automatically or mechanically. There may be many days when one feels little love. We cannot order an emotion anymore than we can learn one from a textbook. So what do we do? The best forms of love are always driven by a thirst or a longing to know and care about another human being. Appetite or desire in the human condition is what educator and scientist Leon Kass believes is the key to the deepest principle of life. He proposes that it's our longing or desire, not our DNA, that's the key to having a life at all. Where our soul may not feel a longing for God or for other people, there is always another option. We can "desire the desire" or, as Meister Eckhart once put it, "long for the longing."

Every pastor and congregation must find a relational path through challenge and hardship, through exhilaration and meaning. A certain complexity seems to

accompany every love. But in the midst of this complexity, we might remember Thomas Merton's experience at a Louisville intersection. He was suddenly seized by the notion that an extraordinary relationship existed between him and all the strangers he could see: "At the corner of Fourth and Walnut . . . I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs."

Pastors have the privilege of plugging in the names of the intersecting streets of their own church and longing for the same astonishing bonds within their congregations that Merton felt with those passersby on that Louisville street corner.