

The hidden kingdom: Sunday, May 13

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Not long ago I was driving to a meeting in an unfamiliar town on a rainy Saturday morning. I stopped at a red light and noticed some kind of protest happening on the street corner--a group of people wearing sandwich boards with huge lettering. Some signs said, "Stop Abortion," while others read, "Pro-choice"--both interspersed with harsher messages. These passionately opposing individuals stood amidst one another, laughing and talking and drinking steaming coffee in the cold rain. Nearby, two people wearing opposing signs embraced. Ah, I thought, see how they love one another.

Here is the holy city adorned as a bride for her husband. A new heaven, a new earth, breaking forth through the rain, hidden as a sign on the street corner. See how they love one another--passionately enough to embrace this moment of reconciliation and still more passionately to continue their opposing struggles on behalf of others. Living in one sphere they lean into a second, striving toward the kingdom of heaven that remains hidden behind the threshold of the human struggle. One world is a feast, the other a fast.

St. Augustine in his commentary on Psalm 148 describes these two realms:

Because there are two periods of time--the one that now is, beset with the trials and troubles of this life, and the other yet to come, a life of everlasting serenity and joy--we are given two liturgical seasons, one before Easter and the other after. The season before Easter signifies the troubles in which we live here and now, while the time after Easter which we are celebrating at present signifies the happiness that will be ours in the future. What we commemorate before Easter is what we experience in this life; what we celebrate after Easter points to something we do not yet possess. This is why we keep the first season with fasting and prayer; but now the fast is over and we devote the present season to praise. Such is

the meaning of the “Alleluia” we sing. . . . The Lord’s resurrection and glorification show us the life that will be given to us in the future.

The season of Easter reconciles times and dimensions, exercising the substance of love within us to see into the reality beyond. It’s like putting on a pair of glasses--at first everything is blurry, but after the eye muscles adjust, you realize what you haven’t been seeing! Observing Easter in prayer stretches the soul into resurrected consciousness in love.

Think about what happens when you pray. What is mediated at the far boundary of the soul where you go in deep prayer? Beyond words and petitions, images and desires, the substance of prayer is love. Contemplation, we are taught, is the infusion of love. Even Solomon asking for discernment in his youthful prayer at the high place at Gibeon was given not intellectual acumen, but a listening heart.

A friend of mine who served in the military during World War II (and is now a nun) was once at a conference with two men, a German and an American. As they wiped dishes one evening after dinner they exchanged stories about the war. The American told of the horror he felt as a young pilot during a particularly savage bombing of a city in Germany. He had orders to bomb the hospital, which he would know by the huge red cross painted on the roof. The second man--after regaining his composure--revealed that his wife had been giving birth to their baby in that very hospital when it was being bombed. My friend tiptoed out of the room as the two men fell into each other’s arms weeping.

Imagine being in heaven, at the end of the world, where we might fall weeping upon one another, waves of reconciliation breaking upon us as we adjust ourselves to this dimension of pure love.

“And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more . . .”

Meanwhile, living the commandment to love one another is mostly a Lent fast of mourning and crying and pain because of love--love misdirected by anguishing mistakes, bad decisions or impulses, distorted passions in the mess of human life.

And yet, even in the mess, signs of the kingdom emerge in the struggle to love, on street corners, in the rain.

It's like St. Peter at the pearly gates, who was busy rejecting the undeserving. Once in awhile, however, he would turn around and find that those he had rejected were getting in to heaven. He complained to Jesus, "Look, I'm doing my job, but somehow those people got in anyway," and Jesus responded, "Oh, that's my mother. She's letting them in the back door."