

The Spiritual Compass of the Church

Strangely enough, I find a lot of my inspiration as a priest from business authors! One of my favorites is Stephen Covey, the author of Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. There is a lot of wisdom in that book, but one insight I have found especially helpful is the need for every organization, the church included, to have a compass to point us in the right direction – True North as Covey calls it. Your compass, he says, should be your mission statement, which is your “big picture” reason for being. It is your grand statement of purpose. It is your statement of where you’re headed, your destination. Your mission statement is your compass, your North Star.

Sometimes I wonder if all the problems in the church today are because we have lost sight of our mission. Just what is our reason for existence, our grand purpose, our guiding North Star? As Christians, we look to Jesus for the answer to that question.

When we read the gospels, we notice that Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for getting sidetracked, for straining out the gnats and swallowing the camels, for focusing on the jots and tittles of the law but

overlooking the big picture, for knowing the letter but not the spirit of the law, for becoming self-righteous and judgmental toward others, for lacking humility and compassion, for drawing the circle of God's acceptance tightly around themselves alone.

Jesus looked at the book of Leviticus – a confusing tangle of ancient legal codes and taboos, mixing primitive superstitions together with enduring ethical insights – and what did he find there? He found laws in Leviticus forbidding a disabled person from being a priest, branding lepers as unclean outcasts from the community, stigmatizing a woman as unclean during her menstrual period or after giving birth. Leviticus forbids same-sex relations, eating lobster, wearing clothes made of two different kinds of fabric, and planting a field with two different kinds of seed.

Jesus looked at this tangle of moral freeways and back roads, and what did he lift out of Leviticus? One single verse: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18b).

Then Jesus looked at Deuteronomy, another legal codebook, and he drew another single verse from it: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your might” (6:5).

He put this verse together with the verse from Leviticus, and he gave the church the big-picture mission statement: love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself. Stay on that road, Jesus says, and you won’t get lost.

If you want to know what God expects of us at Nativity, here it is: Love your neighbor – whoever that neighbor might be – love your children, love your spouse, love your co-workers, love your fellow church members – and love God. Quite simply, love is the spiritual compass of the church, the spiritual compass of every Christian.

Christianity, you see, is not about rule keeping. It is about lovemaking. Obeying the law is the beginning of Christian discipleship, not the end. The spiritual compass of the church is love.

During World War I, a Protestant chaplain with the American troops in Italy became a friend of a local Roman Catholic priest. In time, the chaplain who moved on with his unit was killed. The priest heard of his death and asked military authorities if the chaplain could be

buried in the cemetery behind the church. Permission was granted. But the priest ran into a problem with his own Roman Catholic authorities. They were sympathetic, but they said they could not approve the burial of a non-Roman Catholic in a Catholic cemetery. So the priest buried his friend just outside the cemetery fence.

Years later a war veteran who knew what had happened returned to Italy and visited the old priest. The first thing he did was to ask to see the chaplain's grave. To his surprise, he found the grave inside the fence.

“Ah,” he said, “I see you got permission to move the body.”

“No,” said the priest. “They told me where I couldn't bury the body. But nobody ever told me I couldn't move the fence.”

Love moves fences. Love breaks down barriers that divide people one from another. Love bridges the gap between our differences and disagreements. Love thinks outside the box. Love writes outside the lines. With love, the circle is ever expanding to include everyone. Remember how Edwin Markham put it:

**He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!**

That's the Gospel. God so loved the world... God loves totally, unconditionally and forever – no exceptions. We place limits on that love, but God never does.

I am not talking here about any kind of mushy, sentimental love that depends on how we feel at the moment. I am talking about tough love; the love that is willing to sacrifice oneself for the good of another; the love that is prepared to defer one's own self-interest for the common good; the love that moves beyond our comfort zone and strives to understand and accommodate others. This is the love that brings out the best in us as we do our best for others.

If you have seen the movie Only the Brave about the Granite Mountain Hotshots, 19 of whom lost their lives battling a massive fire near Prescott on June 30, 2013, you know what kind of love I am referring to.

When I think of the Granite Mountain Fire, I do not think

of all the devastation it caused, great as that was. I think instead of those firefighters who sacrificed themselves to save the lives and property of others.

And if you ask, “Why did they do it?” I could say it was their duty. And it was their duty. But duty alone doesn’t throw people into the flames when they don’t have to be there. To sacrifice yourself like that, there has got to be something more. There has to be love. You move toward the fire and you battle the flames because in the very depths of your being there is this spiritual force that keeps you moving forward, impelling you to do what you have to do, no matter the cost. That is true heroism – the willingness to put your life on the line for some greater good.

When Vice-President Joe Biden attended the memorial service for the 19 Hotshots who died on Granite Mountain, he remarked, “All men are created equal. But then, a few became firefighters.”

Wouldn’t it be great if we in the church had that same kind of heroism and love shown by the Hotshots on Granite Mountain – not to put out fires but to set the world on fire with the love of Jesus? If we had the fire in our belly to make love the central force in all we do as a

church.

Love is the mission of the church, not because it is politically correct, but because Jesus says so. The church is called to welcome and serve all people with the same love and acceptance that our great God has for us. The church is a group of people who have nothing in common except Jesus Christ in whom they have all things in common. The church is a community where people can make lots of mistakes and still feel loved, accepted and forgiven. The church is people bound together by their strengths and their brokenness, people who are limping toward the sunrise, but know God's love claims them, everyone.

The church blesses rather than curses, affirms rather than condemns, and counts people in rather than kicks people out. In fact, the only way for you to be excluded from the church is for you to exclude yourself. That's why I think Robert Frost's definition of home applies equally to the church, "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

If there is a history about the Episcopal Church of the Nativity one hundred years from now, it may not say that we had the most beautiful campus or the most awe-

inspiring liturgy or the finest choir or the largest endowment. Other Episcopal Churches surpass us in all those categories. Nor may it say that we had the largest membership –independent and evangelical churches dwarf most Episcopal churches.

But I do hope and pray that when a history of our church is written one hundred years from now, it will say that in this church the members really loved God and loved each other and reached out to least and the last and the lost in our community. That in this church everyone had a place at the table, and no was ever outcast. That in this church meeting needs and healing hurts was a top priority of the members. That in this church people agreed to disagree, lived with their differences and valued their diversity because their unity was in Jesus Christ – not in their politics, or theology, or personal preferences. In this church the members did more together than they ever could do by themselves.

During the Seattle Special Olympics several years ago, nine young people, all with some kind of mental or physical impairment, lined up for the 100-yard dash. The gun sounded and the race was off. But as they reached the half way point in the race, one of the boys fell down, skinned his knee on the track, and started to cry. The

other eight contestants stopped running and all of them turned around and went to the boy who had fallen. A young girl with Down's syndrome kissed him. Then they all lifted the boy to his feet, and together, arm in arm, all nine walked to the finish line. The people in the stadium rose to their feet in thunderous applause, many with tears in their eyes. In this race there was not one winner but nine winners.

Dear people: that is what the kingdom of God is like. Love is more important than winning. Love is more important than getting your way. Love is more important than being right. Love is more important than being Number One. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (I Cor. 13:7-8).

I know: the church can lose its way at times. It can become petty, nitpicking and judgmental. It can become so rigidly religious that it loses focus on what's really important. It can divide into factions pitting one group against another. Its members can engage in gossip and even speak harshly and hurtfully against one another. But still, love is the spiritual compass of the church.

There is a role for law in the Christian life, but the

**greatest law is this: to love God and to love people.
When we do these two things, Jesus says, everything
else falls into place.**

Dr. Gary Nicolosi

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Text – Matthew 22: 34-46

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