

Sept. 22, 2024

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Texts: James 3: 13-4:3, 7-8; Mark 9: 30-37

In today's reading from the book of James, James asks, "Where do conflicts really come from? Why do we have all these conflicts?" [James 4:1] In a similar vein, today's Gospel addresses the question of which disciple is most valuable; who does Jesus love the most? I think both these questions show a misunderstanding that we have about how God loves us.

The way I understand this misunderstanding is through the concept of collectivism vs individualism within culture. In collectivist culture, people understand that they are very much interdependent. For example, a lot of my international students are from collectivist cultures. When one student has a sandwich, they all have a sandwich. You eat a bite, and then you pass it to the next kid who eats a bite, who passes it to the next kid. It's a collectivist sandwich. The idea is that you are part of a community, and that community makes up your identity. In a collective culture when you ask somebody, 'How are you?' they might respond by telling you about their mom or their sister, because 'you' is not just one person. It's the entire family.

This is the opposite of individualistic cultures like the United States, Australia, or Great Britain. In individualistic cultures, you want to stand out, and you want to look strong, and be independent. You don't want to have to ask anybody for help or support. You are identified by yourself, as an individual.

I think that individualism is at the heart of our misunderstanding about how God loves us. I believe that God sees humanity as a collective group. To put it another way, in the English language, the word "you" can be singular or plural, so you can be like me and you, or you can be all of you. God loves you, plural. Jesus doesn't value one more than another; we are one.

People have this fear that there's not enough for that guy and for me. Others must be excluded so you can get your share. But that way of thinking is fear based and super destructive. Remember what Yoda said: *'Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to the dark side.'* Or to use a literary example, let's think about Romeo and Juliet, right? You have these star-crossed lovers and their families, but the whole story really hinges on the hatred that Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, has for the Montagues. Tybalt is actually the cause of the tragedy within the play because he's the one who kills Romeo's best friend and in retaliation, Romeo has to kill him. And Tybalt's most famous line, right at the beginning of the play, is *"Peace. I hate the word as I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee."* In Tybalt, we see a character who is defined by exclusion, by this need to have people on the outside and people on the inside. And this is what causes the tragedy within the play. And this is what causes the tragedy within our lives. Because there really is enough love. We do not need to exclude others to get our share. God loves you. Collectively. All of you.

I have just one more story to share today about God's love, and the way I understand God's love to work. It's about one of my students. His name is Alexis. Alexis comes from Honduras, and he is a student who has experienced a lot of trauma, which means he's a student who is really, really challenging to have in class. This is a kid who will steal every single thing, every paper clip, every pencil, right? This is the kid who takes the fire extinguisher and sets it off in the middle of the hallway, and who cusses at the top of his lungs, and he gets suspended every month for 2 days. This is a kid who I have worked with so hard to get onto a good path that he has actually taken over parts of my life. And the other day, he's in my room just hanging out, and the bell rings and he's still in my room, hanging out—and he's supposed to be moving on to another class. So I say, "*Alexis, you know I love you, but you need to go to class.*" And he says, "*You love me, Ms. Clyde?*" And I said, "*Of course. Of course. Of course I love you.*"

I feel like that's how God is with us too. We say, "*You love us God? Really?*" and God says, "*Of course. Of course. Of course I love you.*" (Plural.) "*Now get to class.*"

Amen.