

If there was a formula for love, (and I know there cannot be one, but I will make an attempt) it would be: compassion + mercy + struggle + surrender + surprise. The wage expectations of the earliest workers in the Gospel of Matthew were what they were supposed to be and they thought they deserved more than the workers who were hired later in the day... and from a literalistic point of view they did and were surprised when they weren't; but this is not a literalistic passage, it is a metaphor: "The kingdom of heaven is like..."

Just as we cannot delve into the mind of God, as Isaiah makes so plain, that God's thoughts are so much higher than ours, we cannot understand the logic or economy of the kingdom of heaven; but we are challenged to understand what it means to live a good life, to struggle to understand what that is personally and as a community to come closer to that kingdom.

Like the workers in the field we assume, sometimes, that if we follow the rules or laws set out by the institutional Church and State that we are well on our way to the kingdom. However the reasons for the rules get lost in the mists of tradition. For example, for a very long time we had a tradition of eating fish on Friday. Why? One of the many reasons was because we were supposed to abstain from meat, which was more expensive at the time than fish, and use the savings to give alms to the poor. It was a lovely tradition, and if engaged in as a spiritual exercise and not just a rule, it would have continued to feed us body and soul. Like many rules, the meaning behind the rule was lost and we kept only part the rule as part of our tradition, as even now we are supposed to abstain in some way on Friday's, but the way in which you keep that tradition is up to you.

The struggle to live in Christ, stand firm in the Spirit and reveal the kingdom of heaven requires both effort and non-effort. Effort, on the one hand to have a spiritual life that is rich and engaged; and non-effort on the other, to be attuned to the world around you and to see and hear Christ wherever they are manifest and be able to respond.

We have all seen the devastation that has been brought to the world lately, and sadly the litany would take up all the time to reflect. What I am heartened by is the compassion that is shown to others when their need is so great: this is when we see the body of Christ in action, in donations, in rescue work, in grief, in holding someone up when they can no longer stand. There is no end to the need, and there is no end to compassion and mercy that we must give to others when their needs exceed ours and in doing so, we grow in our ability to love and understand others despite our limitations. On the other side, sometimes our grace is to accept that help and be the person who needs to be held and come to a new understanding of what it means to live in the face of suffering.

I remember last summer when I was working as a student nurse at CHEO and the evacuation of Fort McMurray was going on at the same time. I thought about the staff at the hospital there who had to evacuate patients and how they would have worried about their loved ones at the same time, but had an ethical obligation to their patients to keep them safe. How would I have behaved in the same circumstance? Could I have continued to offer the best care possible when I was worried about what was going on with my parents, my sister, her children, my partner, my friends?

We cannot know who is last and who first, and how we have understood those concepts have changed and will continue to change as we come to a better understanding of ourselves and our place within the cosmology of creation. What we do know is that standard economic models never work when talking about our spiritual personal and collective lives as Church: I am simply grateful that God's mercy and love are infinite in supply as our demands on them are also infinite. God bless us all in our continuing struggle.