



Dear Folks,

Loving People Hard to Love Part II

We all have a deep need to tell our story, to be heard, to be understood. Much anger, frustration, and resentment come from a feeling of not being heard, not being understood. It is often difficult to make ourselves understood to someone, and what makes the experience much harder is when we get the feeling that the other person isn't trying. Sometimes the truth is more complex.

Perhaps we underestimate the depth of the chasm between our minds. In Malcolm Gladwell's book "Talking to Strangers" he mentions that we tend to underestimate how we can use the same words and gestures and mean different things. Both sides might be trying and failing to connect.

Stephen Covey said, "We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behavior." Consider what that means, that what we experience ourselves can be very different from how others experience us.

In "*The Screwtape Letters*" C.S. Lewis portrays the devil Screwtape teaching his nephew Wormwood how to lead a soul into hell: "Keep his mind on the inner life. He thinks his conversion is something inside him and his attention is therefore chiefly turned at present to the states of his own mind - or rather the expurgated version of them which is all you should allow him to see. Encourage this. Keep his mind off the most elementary duties by directing it to the most advanced and spiritual ones. Aggravate that most useful human characteristic, the horror and neglect of the obvious. You must bring him to a condition in which he can practice self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office (Letter 3)." And "Your patient must demand that all his own utterances are to be taken at their face value and judged simply on the actual words, while at the same time judging all his mother's utterances with the fullest and most over-sensitive interpretation of the tone and the context and the suspected intention. She must be encouraged to do the same to him (Letter 3)." I believe this sort of thing is not uncommon. How do we watch for such behavior in ourselves? I suspect we tend to be very aware of how the other person tries our patience, but we might have no idea how much we try the others' patience. How can we watch for that?

There may be times, and certainly there are abusive relationships, in which we are innocent, and the other person is quite guilty. We want to be careful about getting to that conclusion too quickly and too easily. When it is such a situation, we still have the challenge of how we are going to deal with the situation. Waiting for the other person to change is not going to get us anywhere. When we must play a game that is rigged against us, we must play it well. In Matthew 16:10, Jesus says, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be as clever as serpents and innocent as doves." We must be clever as psychological tricks and traps are thrown at us. Though there is a temptation to use the other's behavior as an excuse to lower the standards of our own behavior, it is essential to strive to be innocent, first because it is right, and second because others might use any lapse on our part as a reason to attack us and make us the villain (never mind they do worse on a regular basis).

This stuff is hard, at least I find it hard. I suggest that if more people took these things into account, we could get along better. Can you think of anything to practice during Lent for more peace in the world?

Blessings,
Fr. Jim