

Poor Peter. Peter lived by the law. Once in a morality class I was asked if I found myself at a 4-Way Stop out in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night, would I come to a complete stop. "Yes" I said. My classmates looked at me like I was crazy. "What?" I asked, "It's the law."

Peter lived by the law because the Israelites lived by their law. This code consisted of 613 laws. Maintaining their purity by living these laws protected them from being assimilated into the world of the pagans. During Jesus' time, this meant the Romans.

The Jews took three steps to insure their identity, 1) they kept Shabbat (the Sabbath); 2) all men were circumcised and 3) they maintained the Purity Laws. Some foods were unclean, some were not to be mixed and people who weren't Jewish were unclean as well. Every good Jewish person kept these laws and this code of living. It kept them distinct.

However, in today's reading from Acts we find Peter sharing a vision – a dream in which he's being told to break these purity laws. Eat unclean foods? No way, Peter responds. But God states: 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

When the vision finishes some men arrive and the Spirit directs Peter to go with them, telling him not to make a distinction between "them" and "us". The Spirit is telling Peter that God's love isn't bound by laws.

Jesus had been telling and showing the disciples that people came before the laws. The Sabbath was made for man – not man for the Sabbath. The hemorrhagic woman may have been unclean but she needed to be healed. Yes, the Syrophenician woman wasn't one of us, but her daughter needed healing. Yes, the Centurion is a Roman, but his son needs healing. Yes, he's a leper, but he needs healing.

In the end of today's gospel Jesus states: "I give you a new commandment – that you love one another." He doesn't clarify what he means by one another.

Did you know that between the Old and New Testaments there are 65 scripture verses telling us to love one another. We're not talking about a warm, fuzzy feeling here. This kind of love goes beyond our personal relationships – it means a heart moved into action.

If love is not about a feeling but about an action, it means we do whatever it takes to live out our baptism promise of “respecting the dignity of every human being.”

A priest friend of mine in Georgia used to volunteer once a month on a Saturday to drive family members of incarcerated men from Atlanta 100 miles to the prison located in middle of the state. The tricky thing about this was that there were strict rules regarding the clothing of the visitors. If a teenage girl or woman wore shorts in the summer, they had to be at least exactly one inch below the knee. The guard on duty decided on whether a family member got to visit.

On one particular Saturday, my friend, Fr. John, drove a teenage girl up to the appointed drop-off spot. He waited to make certain she would be able to enter the prison. It turned out that the guard measured her shorts and deemed them too short. The young girl returned to John's car hysterical. She cried that it could be another six months before she saw her father. Her heart was breaking. His heart was moved with love for this child. He thought for a moment and then told the girl to stay right there. He pulled his car up a bit and removed his trousers. He backed the car up and handed his pants to the girl and told her to put them on. She slipped them on, belted them up and then was admitted to the prison.

He had to leave the area for two hours. While driving he thought, “What happens if I get pulled over for anything and I don't have any pants on? I'm in trouble. I'm an old man riding around in my “tighty whiteys”.

He remembered that a couple he knew from Marriage Encounter lived not too far and he contacted them. They met him and took him to a Goodwill where they found some pants for him.

During the migration of immigrants through Ellis Island there was a great fear of illness being brought into the US – especially Scarlet Fever. Inspectors checked and people were marked with an “A” for acceptable or an “R” for rejected.

In a book about Ellis Island there’s a story about a family with a young child going through the check points. This child, wearing a new coat that had been purchased for her trip to America developed a rash on her hands and arms. The inspector processing her family said that she could not enter the U.S., and marked a large “R” on the back of her coat, but her parents were “Accepted”.

Her parents were devastated at the prospect of being separated from her – who would protect her, how would they reconnect. They couldn’t go back and she couldn’t get in. There was screaming and crying.

Another inspector watched from the sidelines. His heart was moved with love. With hysterical parents watching, he quietly went up to the child, bent down and quieted her by speaking ever so softly. “Sssshh, he said. “It will be okay. What a beautiful coat you have. Let me take a look at it”, he said. While speaking soft to her, he turned the coat inside out. “It has such a beautiful lining”. He then put the coat back on her with the lining on the outside. He marked a large “A” the back side of it and then directed the girl through the check point to her parents.

When I lived in the Atlanta area I volunteered weekly in a hospice. While we were trained to work with the patients, I found that my ministry was largely with the family members – sitting with them and listening to their stories, fears and pain.

The hospice had two wings. On each wing there were eight patient rooms – one on each side of the hall. I spent a great deal of time with one woman whose husband had been there a long time. She talked about how hard it was on the family.

One night she told me that the week before her grandson and daughter had been at church. After Sunday school as her grandson was getting in the car he placed a drawing on the car seat. The drawing was of a hall with four doors on each side. On one side the last doorway was open. Inside the room was a bed with a stick figure in a bed. In the doorway was a smaller stick figure, with a caption "Hi Grandpa".

The boys' mother was confused as to why her son had drawn this picture. She asked him what his Sunday school teacher had asked them to draw. He looked at her and responded – she said to draw what "love looks like".

As I stand here in this holy space and look around this church, I see the women who will join together today in Pennsylvania for a couple of days of prayer, study, rest and laughter for a special time of loving each other and learning about the fruit that comes from a love moved into action.

I see people I know who are serving outside of this parish in our community by feeding people, clothing, teaching and loving them --no matter who they are.

I see those who work on behalf of those being oppressed in this country and in others – who give of their time and their sustenance to put love into action.

My sisters and brothers, in this PLACE. RIGHT HERE. RIGHT NOW.
THIS IS WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE.