

Were someone to ask you what the meaning of the word “love” means, I’d suspect people would have many different answers. There’s the romantic side of love between couples. There’s the love we have for family and friends. There are acts of love such as sacrifice, which we are reminded of every time we look at a crucifix and celebrate Mass. But with this, there is also another aspect of love: namely that love also is there to make us better as people. When we learn about love as giving and receiving, we learn how to pass on the love that God gives us. And as our lives go by, what we see is that acts of love can sometimes challenge us to ourselves change, and can do so much for others who may be hurting when we stand with them and help them through difficult moments they go through, whether it’s caused by themselves or others. Love, indeed, is powerful - and Paul is right as we hear in our second reading, it is the greatest of all things, and it never fails. We however, must strive as humans not to fail one another.

As everyone knows, sometimes we do fail. We fall into sin and are sometimes oblivious to it. And our sins can paralyze us, and also others. But there is a way out. As we hear in Jeremiah, “I am with you to deliver

you, says the Lord.” God is there for us - but we must also reach out to Him and as his followers, and be a people who reach out to one another.

Some years ago, Foxglove Lee, a writer who shares a story called “It Takes a Village,” came to understand this when her neighbors were there for her and her family in a very dark part of her life.

She writes that 13 is an awkward age for anyone, but it was especially stressful for her. Her family life imploded, and they learned that keeping secrets could be a dangerous, even life-threatening practice.

Her father had always been a heavy drinker, but when he lost his job, a downward spiral began with threats of violence against her mom and the children. She never thought she’d feel so helpless or so afraid.

Unfortunately that was only the beginning.

When her mom went back to work full time, her father was left to care for her baby sister. One day she came home from school to find her father passed out on the couch and her sister crying in the crib with a soiled diaper. This was the last straw; her father obviously could not be trusted to

care for a child, so her mom paid the next door neighbor to babysit, but wasn't about to admit the real reason why. Foxglove says her mom pretended that her dad couldn't child-mind because he was looking for another job.

Violence escalated in the household until her mom found the courage to kick out her father and seek divorce. Her dad refused to leave until there was a restraining order against him. Her mom did that to protect the kids.

The police escorted her father out from the house, but that didn't keep him away. He phoned so often that the kids stopped picking up the phone. He filled tape after tape on the answering machine with death threats. He sent pictures in the mail of all the guns he had access too. He sent photos of himself holding those guns, aiming them at the camera.

Foxglove's mom took all this to the police, but they shrugged it off. Tapes of death threats and pictures of guns didn't qualify as evidence they said.

Still, the kids were too ashamed to tell anybody what was going on. Her mom talked to the lawyer, the police and a few family members, but as for

Foxglove and her siblings they only had one another. Keeping secrets she reflected is prevalent in households with rampant substance abuse. They were secretive to a heartbreaking degree.

After a while, it wasn't enough for her father to threaten the the family by phone and through the mail. He smashed a window and broke into their home, entering when her mom was at work and the kids were in school. When she came home that day, with her younger siblings in tow, she knew they needed the police, but in a time before cell phones, she wondered what to do as there were no pay phones near. She knew that she had to break the silence.

Foxglove and her siblings went next door to the neighbor who babysat the youngest sister. They told her everything - about her dad's drinking, his neglect, his death threats and his guns. The neighbor helped her to call her mom and mom called the police. Her dad was taken away in handcuffs for violating the restraining order.

But the ordeal continued.

That was just the first of many times her father broke into the home. When they put bars on the windows, he broke down the door. They could not hide what was going on from the neighbors anymore, not with the noticeable police presence at all hours of the morning. There comes a point when you can't lie anymore or cover for a family member who has wronged you.

When they told the neighbors the truth though, something incredible happened.

The next time her dad came to "take back his house" as she put it, he gave a warning and a date. Her mom called the police but they said he wasn't in violation of the restraining order yet, as they could not act in advance. They were afraid, and her mom was beside herself as she had done all she could to protect the kids and she feared if she waited for her ex husband to show up and then called the police it would be too late.

But this time, when she vented her concerns it wasn't to Foxglove's grandmother who often didn't believe the things her mom told her but it was to the next door neighbor; the one who had cared for her baby sister during

the day. Her neighbor was a loud and opinionated woman and when she called the neighborhood to action, the neighborhood listened.

If Foxglove's dad was afraid of one thing, that one thing was exposure. He trusted the kids to keep quiet and keep his secrets. But now that was changing. On the day he came to the house, the neighbors came to the family's rescue. They all joined hands and formed a human barricade across the driveway.

Her father drove up the street and his car slowed to almost a halt when he saw his family, and the whole neighborhood there with them to give them support, sending a message that his threats and his behavior was not acceptable and he needed to leave. And he did.

When his car pulled away, Foxglove's mom thanked the neighbors and said she had taken up enough of their time. But the neighbors were adamant - her ex husband might not give up so easily. What if he came back when she and the kids were gone? No, they said, they would stay as long as it took. They'd camp out on the front lawn all night if they needed to. Now that they knew what her mom and kids had been through, they were going to be there to protect them.

They were right of course. Her dad did circle by the house until the restraining order violation was able to be called in when he was arrested. The neighborhood, which had never been terribly close or cohesive before that day, worked together to protect the family.

Through the whole ordeal, Foxglove reflects that the most terrifying obstacle they faced as a family was an internal one: the fear of admitting the truth, of worrying what others would think. The shame seemed insurmountable.

This horrendous situation was in no way her fault, but she didn't feel that way at the time. She thought they were the only ones. She thought no one could understand.

It took an incredible strain before her mom, her siblings and Foxglove herself cracked the veneer of normalcy. When they told their secrets, they expected the neighbors to view the family with contempt. Instead, they became the shield. When the police failed them, the neighbors stepped up.

They stood alongside the family, and then they realized they were not alone.

Like her family, it's important that we realize that we do not stand alone either, while at the same time standing with one another. But for that to happen, like that neighborhood we have to remember that we need to confront the reality of sin and be open to also being challenged when confronted with the reality of our own sin.

Not too many people are criminally abusive like Foxglove's dad was. But like him, we can become blind to our actions. Some people aren't aware or choose not to be aware of things like a substance or alcohol abuse, how they talk about or treat others, or their temper. Others justify actions as "just this once" or something no one needs to know about, or a so-called private sin like a battle with sins of the flesh and pornography. And like Foxglove's family, sometimes we can keep these things secret when we know someone who is doing something wrong or the voice of our conscience tells us we need to change.

In the Gospel, which picks up where last Sunday's Gospel ended, the people are confronted with some things they don't want to hear. Namely that God sends prophets to people other than just the Israelites and that His love is freely given. This leads them to go from thinking highly of Jesus to wanting him to be killed. Jesus though speaks the truth and says not what people want to hear, but what they need to hear. Foxglove doesn't speak of what later happened to her father, but at the very least seeing those people standing with his family maybe finally caused him to look at his actions. So the first question is what do we do to confront sin in our own lives and when others challenge us? Can we examine our conscience and not hide from sin but take the steps necessary to correct whatever it is we are battling? Can we ask for true advice from others who will challenge us and to truly help us grow? And even if we aren't asking, how can we handle the prophet who comes to us out of loving concern to help us by letting us know when there is something in our life that needs addressing? Paul has that famous line ***"At present we see indistinctly as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I now partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known."*** Like Paul, when we look in the mirror we can kind of see a reflection of the person we would like to become, a saint. But the mirror is darkened with our sins. Grace and love is what cleans the mirror, and a big

part of that comes through us being introspective and listening to others about the reality of what it is we have done and failed to do and how we can become better persons. Looking at our sins should not be a cause for shame; rather it should be a cause for rejoicing because we can have our eyes opened to what in our lives needs to change. But if we really want to change, we have to understand that true love entails learning how to listen to our conscience, and to others who are there to help us.

The flip side is we help not just ourselves grow but others to grow too. Remember, Jesus speaks of God's love for the gentiles pointing out how God's love knows no limits, and neither can ours. When we see people hurting, we must act. Jeremiah in our first reading challenged the people and he is opposed because people expected a prophet with an easier message. Just like with Jesus, they don't want to hear the message. And we can be the same way. It's a lot easier to hear the good things than the challenging ones. But for true growth, we look back and see a parent, teacher or coach affirmed us but also challenged us because they saw our potential. So what do we do? If we really love our neighbor, we will do the same. Certainly there are cases like Foxglove's family was in, where you need to get involved right away out of concern for a person's safety. But

other times it can be a situation of silence where a person is afraid of upsetting another, perhaps out of fear or just wanting to ignore a problem or explain it away. We have to remember as Jeremiah did that God is with us - ***“they will fight against you but not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”*** If your conscience tells you a family member, a neighbor, a coworker may be doing something they need brought to their attention, we need to act on it. If we see an injustice or an action that needs correction, no matter who it is, we need to act. We do that through prayer, through talking with others, and then through ultimately acting where we help them. As I reflected on last week, we can certainly judge - but it must always be done out of love to help the person not publicly shame them or make ourselves feel superior to them. They might not like what you have to say at first, but you just might save a soul and bring so much peace to a person’s life and the lives of people around them because you were willing to act.

Momentarily we will do two things: we will say “peace be with you” to those around us, and we will ask Jesus to dwell in us when we receive Holy Communion by saying “Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” Both of these

actions have symbolism, but also point to something quite real: the Eucharist really is Jesus coming to be with us, and shaking the hand of our neighbor really needs to symbolize that we care about our neighbor and that the love we have for one another is real. May these actions truly transform us so that our eyes are opened to letting God love us by helping us to overcome our sins, and that our eyes are opened to see the people around us who may be hurting or in need of someone to help them to see the reality of the harm their actions are causing them or others in their lives. Sin is ugly and powerful; ultimately of course Jesus will be killed. But His love will triumph. Love will never fail you, so let Jesus into your hearts. Be willing to be challenged by others who love you. And, like Jesus and Jeremiah, remember that really loving someone can have consequences, but that when we challenge others because we love them and are willing to deal with anger or being shut out of someone's life in the short term, because we were willing to be a prophet when they needed it most they may one day be in heaven because of us. Love indeed never fails - and as we prepare to celebrate Holy Communion we are reminded that God is indeed with us always. So may we never stop running to Him, and, strengthened by His love, never back down from doing all we can to bring

others to Him knowing that people need not just hugs, prayers and cards, but they also need us to act and not be silent in the face of sin.