

You can tell a lot about a church from its website. You can tell, for example, what age group a congregation considers important. If a church doesn't have a website at all, folks studying church patterns say you can almost guarantee that it's a church focused toward the past rather than the present or the future. If a church has a website that isn't seriously overhauled regularly, it's probably a church that's mainly composed of middle-aged adults with only a few techies who keep the site up and running. And if a church's website isn't both creative and interactive, then it probably doesn't have a current focus on or the possibility of reaching out toward young adults in their teens and twenties. Most church websites are a huge disappointment, but a few are dynamic and exciting. My favorite these days belongs to The Meeting House, a Canadian based congregation. While I don't agree with all the specific theology of the Meeting House, I love its webpage for its intro. When you go the site, a steady drumbeat begins to play and the screen flashes with the words "Some Thoughts on the Value of Religion." Every once in a while, even as the drumbeat continues, you hear a young woman's voice call out in the distance "Is anybody out there?"

And then the quotes begin to appear:

"Men never do evil so cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction. " Blaise Pascal (boom boom) "Is anybody out there?"

"Some say the only cure for prejudice is to abolish religion." G.W. Allport (boom boom) "Is anybody out there?"

“Ethnic and religious conflict remain the most intractable and dangerous problems in the world today.” John Shattuck (boom boom) “Is anybody out there?”

“With or without religion good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but, for good people to do evil, that takes religion.” Steven Weinberg (boom boom) “Is anybody out there?”

“It’s hard to be religious when certain people are never incinerated by bolts of lightning.” Calvin and Hobbes (boom boom) “Is anybody out there?”

“Of all the tyrannies that affect mankind, tyranny of religion is the worst.” Thomas Paine (boom boom) “Is anybody out there?” And then the words flash across the screen: GOD HATES RELIGION!

The writer of today’s gospel passage would agree with that website. John didn’t have much respect for religion. Because of that, Ray Brown, the late biblical scholar with whom I was lucky enough to study the gospel of John, used to call the group that compiled that gospel and the later Johannine letters “the community of the beloved disciple.” And in that phrase we learn the two key things that are important to understand today’s passage from John. One, that group put a lot of emphasis on community, and two, one of the most important parts of community was love.

The two ideas sound nice, don’t they? We hear them a lot and they’re easy to get our heads and hearts around. We just LOVE love. And yet John and his community aren’t really interested in things that can be captured in Hallmark greeting cards. What John is interested in is love as it’s lived in community, as it’s acted out in the every day, every night lives of people. John’s community

wants the focus to be put, not on what we can say love is, but on what love actually does.

Until a year or so ago when Kathy's sister-in-law told us that she was going to be a contestant on the show, I'd never heard of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. But now that I'm aware of it, I constantly hear the tag line created by the show's original host, Regis Philbin. At least two or three times a week I overhear someone saying: "Is that your final answer?" That phrase has become globally popular as a smart-mouthed comeback to almost anything we might say.

Do you want to go see The Illusionist or World Trade Center tonight? Are you certain? Is that your final answer?

Do you want dinner now or later? Positive? Is that your final answer?

Do you really love me? You sure? Is that your final answer?

The genius behind Philbin's repetitive question is that it acknowledges everyone's desperate need to know we can still get another chance, to say one thing and then change our minds and choose a different answer. "Is that your final answer?" gives everyone wiggle room.

Jesus, and John's community that was determined to follow in his way, didn't have any room for Philbin's slogan. Love one another, they both said, and show it by the way you act. Don't try to wiggle out of it. For, hard as it is, love embodied in our day-to-day choices and lives is, for those following in the way of Jesus, the ultimate, the only, the final answer.

Jesuit priest Tony de Mello, director of the Sadhana Institute of Pastoral Counseling near Poona, India used to teach that there are ultimately only two things in the world: God, whose truest name is love; and fear, which is given many different names. One evil in the world: fear. One good in the world: love.

Love, John says in other places in the gospel, is often called by other names—freedom, justice, peace, or God. The label doesn't really matter.

Neither, Father de Mello held, does the label for fear. There's no evil in the world that you cannot trace to fear. Not one. Ignorance based on fear, caused by fear, that's where the evil comes from. Pick any example of an evil. Since it's been in the news so much of it these days, let's take terrorism and violence. de Mello would say that the truly nonviolent person, the person incapable of violence and terrorism, is fearless, free from fear, while the violent person is responding to it. Think of the last time you were intensely angry. Was there some fear behind it? What were you afraid of losing? Or think of some angry person you know, maybe somebody you are afraid of. Can you see how frightened she or he is?

Father de Mello is clearly in sync with John's gospel. There are only two choices in the way we live—love or fear. Two choices by which we must approach all of life—love or fear. If you choose love, you must choose it consistently, in all situations. If you don't, you're still driven by fear, not love. If you want to be my disciple, choose, Jesus urges us in today's passage. Which is your final answer?

In today's gospel passage, Jesus leaves us with an embarrassing concreteness to our discipleship—namely others being able to see the love we have for them. If we went over to Piermont and asked people on the street, "Do you love anyone?" I think most folks would say "Of course I love" and then list off a group of people. If we asked "Do you love God?" I think we'd still get a majority of people saying yes. But if you got specific and asked those same people "Do you love the ignorant, the poor, the homeless, the illegal immigrant, the fundamentalist, the person who seems to represent everything you stand

against?” I think we’d get a different answer. There was always an unyielding specificity to Jesus’ ministry. He didn’t go about loving people in some abstract sense; he loved person after person, ministering to each one according to his or her need, welcoming all with a love that had no place for fear in it.

Like each of us, the early church had to struggle with what this love meant. They were afraid, afraid of being persecuted and executed just as Jesus had been. They longed to remain together, in their small safe communities, where they knew and trusted each other. They didn’t want to take the way of Jesus and move out into the countryside or out into other villages or out into other nations. Fear caused them to huddle together in numbers and safety.

But one example after another from the book of Acts shows us what happened. The Holy Spirit, using everything from chance encounters to persecution, forced the early church out into the countryside. Today’s reading from Acts gives us an example of one of the less violent nudges that the Holy Spirit gave the church. Philip, the main character in the story, wasn’t one of the original 12 disciples who sat at Jesus’ feet but he had become a deacon in the early church. And he was one of those scattered abroad by persecution. Coming out of such persecution, Philip’s main motivation wasn’t love, but fear.

Acts tells us that the inner voice of God nudged Philip: “Get up, Philip, and go to Samaria.” But Philip said no. For, as the song from South Pacific goes, from childhood, Philip had been carefully taught to hate and fear the Samaritans. He was taught by his religion that it was ordained by God to be prejudiced against Samaritans. So when God nudged him Philip said. “Samaria?” Why would I go to there? Jews and Samaritans hate each other. We don’t talk together. We don’t intermarry. Samaritans are people who would

contaminate me and get in the way of my religious beliefs. C'mon, God. Get real." But love was on the move and love overcomes fear. So God whispered to Philip again, "Philip, is that your final answer? I know you're afraid but I'm asking you to get up and go to Samaria and preach God's love to the Samaritans, that God loves the Samaritans as much as the Jews."

Philip reconsidered. He thought of how he'd heard of God's love in action in the life of Jesus. And so he got up and left. He took the way of Jesus seriously and crossed the line into Samaria, where no self-respecting Jew of his day would be caught dead. And you know what? He turned out to be really good at showing God's love on the move in Samaria. His ministry there thrived.

Then the voice of God nudged him a second time. "Get up and take the wilderness road to Gaza." The wilderness road. Jerusalem to Gaza. The request to leave his considerable success in Samaria and make a strange wilderness trek had to be a disappointing, if not insulting, blow for Phillip. Because your efforts in that city were so successful, Philip, we are assigning you to a deserted stretch of road without a single village! Again Philip said no. But love was on the move and love overcomes fear. And God asked, in God's gentle, loving way, "Is that your final answer?" Philip didn't pull a Jonah move, forcing God to send a large fish after him to get him to go. Philip just reconsidered, got up, and headed out in the direction of Gaza. He went, but notice, he was not very proactive in what he did.

He was on that wilderness road, where he was supposed to be, and suddenly he saw a man in a chariot. Did he take it upon himself to approach him in love? Nope. So God said to Philip, "Go and talk to that Ethiopian eunuch." And Philip responded, "God, maybe you haven't noticed, but he's an Ethiopian. We

don't have anything to do with Ethiopians. My whole life I've been taught to be prejudiced and afraid of Ethiopians and other people of color. So nope, I'm not going over to talk with him."

And, ever on the move, the loving voice of God spoke to him again, "Philip, is that your final answer, because I want you to go over and talk to that Ethiopian." Philip responded, "God, maybe you didn't notice, but he's a eunuch. You've got to your own scripture! Deuteronomy 23:1 make it clear that eunuchs are not allowed to be part of the Kingdom of God because of their sexual impotency. I've been carefully taught by my religion not to talk with them, eat with them, or come into physical contact with them lest I become religiously unclean. Go over and talk to a eunuch? Yeah, right!"

And the loving voice again asked: " Philip, is that your final answer because I want you to get up and to the Ethiopian eunuch over in that chariot." Reluctantly Philip reconsidered and went over to the Ethiopian eunuch. But he was still afraid so he rudely asked him, " Do you really understand what you're reading?" The man explained that he's been reading from the prophet Isaiah and Philip used the occasion to explain about Jesus and how much he loved and helped all those he met.

And the Ethiopian eunuch must have really understood what he was reading and Philip's explanation, because he believed the impossible—that God would love him, an Ethiopian eunuch, sitting in a chariot in the desert reading Isaiah with a really frightened guy called Philip. He believed that God loved him, exactly as he was, and all he had to do, now, was lovingly ask and he would be baptized. That's after all what baptism is-- the mark that God loves us, not

because of anything we do, but because of who we are, God's children, each of who matters infinitely to go.

So the Ethiopian bravely asked to be baptized. You know, today if that question is asked of most religious leaders—Why can't I be baptized?—the response would probably be a list of religious boundary questions. Well, do you really understand what's going on in baptism? What do you believe about God? About the Trinity? Will you reform your life and give up working in that thief's den they call a court in Ethiopia? You understand that, because of your sexual "difference" you still really won't be able to enter the Temple with everyone else, don't' you? If we welcome you, you've got to realize that your place really isn't... the same as ours. We'd like it to be, but we're still a little afraid, so we'll need to have a few decades of dialogue about how to include you before we can completely welcome you in.

But that's not the response the eunuch got from Philip. This time, after running in his mind through all the objections and ways to stall, Philip didn't wait for the inner voice of God to ask "Philip, is that your final answer?" Love was on the move and Philip was no longer afraid. He grabbed a hold of the eunuch, went arm in arm into the water, baptized him, and sent him on his way rejoicing. You know, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is often called the conversion of the Ethiopian, but I think it should really be called the conversion of Philip from fear to love. For out in the desert where he didn't want to be, Philip discovered that love broke down one more barrier, overturned his narrow perceptions and prejudices, and made the circle of God's family much wider than Philip and his religious upbringing could ever imagine.

The voice of God whispers most often, not in religions, but in unusual places through unexpected prophets. Of all the sermons I've heard in the last few years, none has moved me as much as the semi-sermon given by Bono, the lead singer of the musical group U2, at the February 2006 National Prayer breakfast. In it Bono spoke truth to power, saying among other things that " Love is on the move. Mercy is on the move. God is on the move. Moving people of all kinds to work with others they have never met, never would care to meet... Conservative church groups hanging out with spokesmen for the gay community, all singing off the same hymn sheet on AIDS... Soccer moms and quarterbacks... hip-hop stars and country stars... This is what happens when God gets on the move ...Crazy stuff. Evidence of the spirit. It's breathtaking. Literally. It stops the world in its tracks."

God hates religion, which builds walls of fear and exclusion. Love, God, casts out all fear and pulls everyone in. Love is on the move. Jesus, John, Philip and Bono all call us to decide: love or fear. Which will we choose? Which is our final answer?