

When life gets complicated, find a simple refrain

Mother Teresa's speeches were always simple and direct, whether she was speaking to one person or to a crowd of one thousand, whether to presidents, prelates or laypeople. The message was always Jesus, nothing more, nothing less.

I once heard her say that one's hand is "the Gospel on five fingers." Holding her hand in the air, lifting one finger at a time, she demonstrated as she spoke: "you-did-it-to-me."

She was referring to Matthew 25, Jesus' discourse about the last judgment, with its famous verse 40: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

Life gets complicated, workplaces and homes become cluttered with strained relationships, conflicts do their best to suck us into the maelstrom, and we can get so busy with daily life that we overlook those at our door in need. That is why simple reminders of the Gospel can be helpful in setting us and our attitudes straight.

The Gospel on five fingers reminds us that we meet Jesus in every other person. How will we treat him?

To put it mildly, St. John of the Cross was not always treated well, even by his own Carmelite brothers. Still, he did not seek retribution or revenge. Asked why, he said, "Where there is no love, put love, and you will find love."

It is easy for us to become embittered and vengeful when we find ourselves in a situation that seems devoid of love. John's simple teaching invites us to "put love" there, because he knew that all love comes from God, and that the seed of love is in every human person, created in God's image and likeness.

That seed can get buried in concrete-hard hearts, and cruel dynamics can develop in any group. John knew that love



ARCHBISHOP
J. PETER
SARTAIN

responds to love, and the one who gently and consistently "puts" love where it is needed will watch as hard hearts melt.

The late Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan was imprisoned by the North Vietnamese government for 13 years before being expelled from his country. He once

wrote that at first he had found loving as Jesus loves difficult. Like Mother Teresa, he found the key in seeing Jesus in those with whom he came into contact.

He wrote, "Here is an easy formula to remember: 'Others = Jesus.' Applying this equation in my own life would make me a collaborator of love forever."

He made the Gospel message simple so he could keep it always at the forefront of his thoughts.

How hard it must have been in those North Vietnamese re-education camps to love as Jesus loves. He committed himself to seeing Jesus in the guards, the generals and others who kept him captive.

Life gets complicated, and when it does, it helps to hold on to a simple refrain which keeps us grounded in the Gospel of Jesus.

The main thing is love

Phylacteries were small capsules of parchment worn by Jewish men on their foreheads and arms (at the level of the heart). Inside were miniature scrolls containing four essential Scripture verses: Exodus 13:1-10, Exodus 13:11-16, Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Deuteronomy 11:13-21. Wearing phylacteries was a literal way of keeping the law of God before one's eyes and in one's heart, so as never to forget what is indispensable to the life of faith.

My episcopal motto is a simple kind of refrain to remind myself what I am

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about: "Of You My Heart Has Spoken" (Ps 27:8). For me, there are two "yous" in the verse — God, to whom everything in my life is to be ordered; and God's people, whom he loves and to whom he has given me.

I often repeat the verse in prayer as a way of deepening my roots in God and directing my life toward him and toward you.

Life gets complicated, and when it does, it helps to hold on to a simple refrain which keeps us grounded in the gospel of Jesus. No matter our vocation or our job, no matter the circumstances or crises in which we find ourselves, he calls us to love.

Cardinal Van Thuan prayed, "Lord, love is the means you want me to use to bear witness to you, or you would have shown me another way."

If each of us could find a simple refrain to cling to — from the Scriptures, the writings of a saint, or a holy loved one — we would discover the presence and action of God in more ways than we thought possible. We could write the refrain on a card and keep it in our wallets, under the glass on our desks, on the refrigerator or at our bedside, as a simple guide in the midst of complicated lives.

Several years ago, some friends gave me a pen set for my desk, with an engraved message: "Always remember, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."

For those who follow Jesus, the main thing is always love — the love of Jesus for us, in us, and through us.