NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Let's try it: Love your neighbor for one week

Renée Schafer Horton | Mar. 22, 2011 NCR Today

?Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat.?
--Mother Teresa

Monday was a day when the message of ?Love your neighbor? came through loud and clear in my life.

First, a professor expressing frustration about a challenging student, said, ?He responds very well to kindness.? She had just detailed the myriad ways the student had made her life a gauntlet of woe, and yet, in the end, recognized that perhaps the best way to help him persist to graduation would be to see him not as a problem, but as a person -- to reach out to him in concern for his eventual success not condemnation of his failing.

Next, one of our children was sharing how this child felt separated from various family members because said child felt invisible: ?I know they try, and I know they have their own problems, but it is like they think hey know me because they know what I *do*. But they don?t know how I feel, or who I *am*, because no one ever bothers to ask me about me and then really listen to what I say.?

The statement, full of the angst that comes naturally when we feel unseen by the world, reminded me of the many conversations I?ve overheard both in and outside our home that began with some version of, ?Let me tell you about me,? instead of ?So, tell me what is up with you.? Humans often seem to be a self-focused people. But where, I wonder, does love fit into that?

Finally, I learned of a man being fired from his job late Monday. In this economy, layoffs still happen and unemployment is still high [1], so much so that we who are lucky enough to have jobs may yearn to block out the bad news of someone else?s loss of work.

But this case was special: The man had suffered all his life with horrific seizures, so much so that he was faced with two options -- live forever that way or have surgery to remove part of the brain causing seizures [2]. He chose the latter, and one of the side-effects is slowness in brain processing and a lessened ability to remember steps in a task.

He found a job, and daily struggled amid people who viewed him as stupid and slow. He wasn?t stupid -- people kid themselves if they think the handicapped don?t know they?re being talked about -- but he was slow in completing his job functions. A new employee learned what had happened to him and tried to help him out. She was kind to him and patient, and, without knowing it, probably made him feel more like a human being than he?d felt like in years.

Her care didn?t save his job; the boss decided he wasn?t worth keeping. I heard he cried when fired, and I think the only person it bothered was the new employee who had begun to see him as a person, not a problem. While she could not save his job, in treating him as someone of value, she gave him a small gift that, one hopes, helped both the giver and the givee.

Everyone yearns to be heard, understood, seen, *known*. Everyone craves -- yea, needs -- kindness shown them by other people. Everyone needs to be valued for who they are as a child of God, not just for what they can do for us, produce for us, give to us.

One way to honor people for just being unique creations is to love them. And the best way to do that is to listen to them, and then (surprise!) listen some more. We need to hear each other?s stories, see each other?s crosses, help bear each other?s burdens by offering a welcoming ear. We need to recognize that other people matter just as much as we do in this great, big world.

So many of our conflicts (cultural, familial, workplace) center on us, well ... centering on ourselves: My life is worse than your life, my job is harder than your job, my family struggle is more difficult than your family struggle.

So, a challenge this week to those of us willing to take it: Let?s try to really love our neighbor. Even if he bugs us. Even if she cuts us off in traffic. Even if he takes the last cookie from the cookie jar. Let?s try -- for one week -- to see someone else?s cross and not be blinded by our own. Let?s try to cut people slack, give someone the benefit of the doubt, seek to understand more than be understood.

Because, in the end, the world we experience is the one we make, and one made of love is better than one made of anything else. So, as Someone once told his group of scraggly followers: Love one another.

And if you can spare any space on your prayer tree, please pray for the young man who was fired that he might find an employer willing to give him a chance and that he not give into despair.

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[1] http://money.cnn.com/2011/01/07/news/economy/december_jobs_report/index.htm
[2] http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org/about/treatment/surgery/index.cfm