

Easter 5C 2013
John 13:21-35

A few weeks ago, I bought a book I never thought I would willingly buy. In fact, this is the first time in probably over 50 years that I have had any positive thoughts about this book. It's called *Czerny: The Art of Finger Dexterity for the Piano, Op. 740* from *Schirmer's Library Of Musical Classics*. I had another book as a young piano student that looked the same by a guy named Hanon. That book was called the *Virtuoso Pianist in 60 Exercises - Book 1: Piano Technique* from *(Schirmer's Library, Volume 1071)*. When I was a piano student, I hated those books with a passion. They were boring exercise books. I could never make the connection with how practicing out of those books could make me a better pianist for the music that I really wanted to play. I graduated to Bach fugues; they weren't so boring; they were just tough until I could really learn to play them with dexterity and the proper technique. Did I see the connection between having the skill to play Bach and the horrendous 20 minutes each day of pounding through Czerny and Hanon? Of course not.

But that was looking through a glass darkly, if you will. At this time in my adult life, however, I not only see the benefits of practicing those awful exercises four times a piece before being allowed to go outside and play with my friends, but I even bought the books willingly and with anticipation to try this again – of my own free will.

Even when I sometimes cried when practicing because I didn't want to be there and my friends were calling me from outside, my mother would say to me, "Two more times each! You'll thank me when you get older!" And my grandmother would stick her two cents in when she was around. In her strong Serbian accent, she would say, "Prek-tis, prek-tis, prek-tis!" Well, I had to get a lot older before I would admit the connection between what I was told to do and how it would make me a better pianist. Now when I play, I notice the difficulty I have with technique and dexterity and have decided the time is coming soon when I will sit and practice from those books so I can play the pieces that I really want to play and play them relatively well.

All I was being asked to do was practice 30 minutes a day. But most of the time it was a real chore and a dark path to be muddled through until I was able to finish and see the light of day again.

The funny thing was that when I was visiting friends in other houses on the street, their parents would ask me to play their pianos and I would love to perform for them. I just didn't get that practicing Czerny had an impact on my ability to play a little Beethoven or Henry Mancini or some of the well-known show tunes of the fifties and early sixties. And my friends' parents would say, "Doesn't she play well? We just love it when she plays for us." Knowing how she had to sit on me every day to practice, my willingness to excitedly run down the street to put on an impromptu concert for another family would drive my mother crazy.

But it was fun to play for friends – and I didn't have start with Czerny or Hanon. I didn't have to start with the basics in my mini-concerts. I could go right into the good stuff.

It was the basics that provided me with a foundation to play the more complicated pieces. It was the basics that built the foundation for me to sight read, play new music, and have a repertoire of

show-off pieces. And it was the basics that made it possible for me to quickly learn to play other instruments.

Through all of the events and discourse in this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus ends by talking about the importance of The Basic foundation needed to be his follower: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another: By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

A new commandment? How often have we been told that in one form or another in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures? It's not new. We hear it over and over again. Along with the tagline, "You'll know they are Christians by their love."

Love one another. Everything else we know or are or do as Christians comes from that commandment that Jesus left with his disciples before being turned over to the high priests. He knew that if they could at least love one another, then chances were high that their lives would reflect that love in everything else they did as his followers.

But he also knew they were only learning this way of living. They needed to keep doing it – even when it was difficult – so that love for others would transform into compassion for those who approached them as followers of Jesus. Or love for others would transform into the gift of healing as they came upon those whose lives needed to be healed. Or love for others would transform into the gift of forgiveness as they listened and observed the brokenness of the men and women around them.

Love is a transforming gift. Love is the primary and fundamental driving force for a Christian life. Not just any love, but God's love. That's what we share: God's love as demonstrated and taught by Jesus. If we can do that, then we have formed the foundation for a truly Christian life.

But like my piano exercises, we have to practice this kind of love. We might not even feel it in the beginning, but we have to intentionally practice it in every aspect of our life. As we are increasingly intentional about it, it becomes more natural for us to live into it and allow it to transform our relationships with others and our understanding of the needs of the community and the world. As this love becomes more natural for us, as it becomes a basic part of our souls, our understanding of politics will change, our understanding of giving will change, our desire to stretch ourselves into new ways of living and giving of ourselves will change.

One of the ways we remind ourselves and intentionally bring the practice of this love into the center of our lives is to take time a few times a day to stop and be with God. "Oh, I can't do that. Do you have any idea how busy I am and how full my calendar is?" I probably do. Jesus probably knows how busy you are. God knows how busy you are. But stopping for 3-5 minutes a few times a day to turn toward God and ask for strength to continue to love all of those who touch our lives – I'll bet that within a few weeks, we'll notice – or others will begin to notice – a shift in us as slightly more compassionate, more understanding, more empathic, and possessing a calmness and presence that might not have existed to such a degree before.

But a couple of questions and answers are pretty crucial to experiencing this transformation. For many of us, it's not easy beginning a new discipline on our own. We need some help. Those in religious communities often have a daily cycle of prayer that keeps them alert to the need to stop what they're doing and reconnect with the divine. Often when I was in Turkey and many times since then, I was so aware of the times when the call to prayer was broadcast over a loudspeaker through the towns and villages and cities, reminding people that it was time to stop what they were doing and turn toward Mecca with their prayers. Even non practicing Muslims – cultural Muslims is how I think of them – heard that reminder. It happens five times a day, every day. After a while, even for this Christian, I was reminded that it was a good time to stop, briefly reconnect with God, and then move on to the rest of my day.

I have often thought since that experience that maybe ringing the church bells three times a day could begin to remind those in hearing range that a community of God is present. For Christians and others, it might be just the thing to get them to briefly stop what they're doing and say a prayer or two. This morning I thought – wouldn't it be something if all Episcopal churches in and around Honolulu rang their bells three times a day as a reminder to all of us to stop, reconnect, remember the importance of love as Jesus taught us, and then re-enter our days? For those of other religions or no religions, it might just be a moment or reminder to stop, breathe, and regain the calm they need to go through the rest of their day. I wasn't Muslim, but that call to prayer certainly broke into my consciousness and ever so briefly took me away from whatever was happening and gave me the opportunity for connecting with God and remembering who I was.

There are in your prayer books opportunities for short daily devotions. Look at page 136. Prayers for the morning, for noon, for evening, and at the close of day. One short page each. Or just be silent for a couple of minutes. Or say the Lord's Prayer.

These are all ways to help get us in the mind of loving those with whom we come in contact – from family members to service people to colleagues and even to members of this parish. But we have to learn to be intentional before loving each other as Jesus loves us becomes an essential part of who we are.

I can promise you that this intentionality and eventual transformation of soul will not be nearly as painful as practicing Czerny was for me. But I can also say with some certainty, that intentional prayer and practice of Christian love will transform our lives, give peace to us spiritually and emotionally, and bring some level of peace to those whose lives we touch.

As my grandmother would say, “Prek-tis, prek-tis, prek-tis!”

Amen.

Elizabeth A Zivanov+
April 28, 2013

