

One Chocolate Chip Cookie At A Time

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When my sister and I were young, maybe I was in second grade and Lisa was in kindergarten, our father worked a traditional nine-to-five job and our mother worked the swing shift at the hospital, 3:00pm to 11:30pm. It meant our parents needed some extra help around the house and, especially, some extra help with childcare.

One Saturday morning our folks sat us down to explain the situation and introduced us to the idea of a person coming to live with us and stay in an extra room we had at our house. Our mom spoke kindly of a woman, Ina Silverberg, who was older, a mummu (or grandmother in Finnish), who did not have many resources, needed a place to live, and could use a little extra money to help with her finances.

The idea of a strange, older lady coming to live in our house did not sit well with my second-grade mind. I was captive to prejudice: would she smell? I was inflexible: would she mess up my after-school playtime with friends? I was afraid: would she try to make me eat things I didn't like - broccoli, liver, peas!? I was childish and self-centered: how would her presence mess up my entitled, early elementary, perfectly establish, and unchangeable life?

Mom calmly spoke of our need to be more like Jesus. (I heard that a lot growing up: Chuck, how can we be more like Jesus?) I hated when she met my objections with this question, but for our mom, Jesus' life and, more importantly, his actions were to be

the plumb line by which we measured our own lives. The bottom line was, Jesus welcomed the poor, the stranger, and the outcast, and so then we too must strive to do the same. In this case, it meant inviting Ina Silverberg to come and stay at our house and, in no small way, become part of our family's life.

In numerous ways, my resistance to welcoming Ina into our family home mirrors the resistance Jesus experienced as he came to live and minister among God's people, Israel. John's gospel, from which all our gospel readings this Easter season are taken, is clear from the first chapter. John writes, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."

How many times does Jesus lament that he came to bring love and grace and truth only to be rejected by the established, the in control, and the powerful? We might take a guess at the number, but it's safe to say the number of times Jesus was rejected by advantaged folk far outweighed the times he was welcomed with open arms. I had an advantage! I was the son. I already lived in the house. No one was coming in here and messing up my life!

I protested. I lost. Ina Silverberg, our new, resident mummu, moved into our house at 810 Florence Avenue, in Astoria, Oregon, and I was mad. I made it clear from the very first breakfast Ina sat with us at our kitchen table. I didn't talk with her. I didn't make eye contact. When I gathered up my things to head out the door to school, I met her kind wishes, "Have a happy day; learn things", with an icy silence. When she greeted

me at the door after school, I continued my non-recognition of her presence. I went directly to my room, closed the door, and plotted my revenge. “Maybe she doesn’t like spiders,” I thought. “Maybe worms terrify her,” I wondered. I didn’t even go outside and play with my neighborhood pals. I simply spent a couple hours figuring out where I might find a hearty supply of spiders and worms, which I might tuck under her pillow.

As I mentioned earlier, all our gospel readings this Easter season are from John’s gospel. In chapter 6 of John, commonly known as the Bread of Life chapter, Jesus is telling his followers that he is “the living bread that came down from heaven”, and that “if anyone eats of this bread, they will live forever”. This proclamation of the astounding life Jesus brings is met with some hard resistance. The followers begin to grumble. Finally, Jesus lays out before them what a gift it is to be in his presence, a gift given by God. As the chapter ends, the writer tells us, “Many of his followers turned back and no longer walked with him”.

I shut my bedroom door to the presence of the new care provider in my home. Many of those Jesus first encountered shut their hearts and minds against the presence of God’s love, dwelling right there among them, in the physical presence of Jesus. It seems like even after two thousand years, not much has changed with the human heart. How many of us have some built in resistance to the simple, yet profound, love of God that comes to dwell with us in Jesus? I know I have some; maybe we all do to some degree.

I've been thinking about this reality, our resistance to love, a lot lately. How is it that we both resist the love of God as it comes to us in Jesus and, following that, resist sharing this same love with the people we meet in and through the course of our everyday lives? War is raging in Ukraine. Over a million people in the United States alone have died of the coronavirus these past two years. Homelessness, hunger, and untreated mental illness continue unabated throughout our country. Addiction, and the destructive behaviors that grow out of it, are skyrocketing throughout the land. The only thing people seem to really give a hoot about is who is winning and who is losing, whether it's in politics, on social media, in the stock market, or in some professional sports league of some kind.

Where's the love Jesus talks about in our gospel reading today? Not a sappy, sentimental, emotional love, but a sacrificial, self-giving, does not look for a return kind of love? Where is it today: in our communities of faith, our neighborhoods, our schools; in our politics, our social actions, our care for the earth, our conversations with those who differ from us? I'm not sure I can answer these questions, but I do know we are in more dire need of love, and to share love, than we have ever been, maybe in the history of humanity.

Though, amid my current pessimism, there is a memory of what happened that day after school, when I shut my bedroom door and plotted my revenge against the new mummu in my house. It may have been an hour, maybe two, but at some point, there came a knock on my bedroom door. It was Ina mummu. She had in her hand a plate of chocolate chip cookies. They were warm,

fresh-baked from the oven. She sat down the plate on the little desk in my room. Next to it, she placed a glass of milk. I barely looked up from my slumped over position on the floor of my room. The smell of cookies and her kindly voice (“I thought you might like these”) finally began to melt the resistance of my stone-cold heart. I looked up, and I saw the most genuine, warm, loving, smile I had ever seen radiate across her whole face.

There was something about that smile, her genuine love, that saved me that day. She had come from God knows what terrible situation, and yet what she did was show and share love. I could have gone a lot of ways that day. Maybe become an ever-resentful, unmanageable, problem child, but that didn’t happen. Somehow, dwelling there among us, sharing her love with us, drew me into a different way of life, a way of life that valued, if not always practiced, love for those around me.

Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

I don’t think it took Jesus long to come to understand that the love poured into him by God, the love which then flowed out of his heart to a wounded and grieving world, would be met with resistance. You see that kind of love has a way of changing things, transforming the world, and the world, on most days, does not want to be changed or transformed. Like second grade me, we all have too much invested in “the way things are now”

to be open to “the way God is making all things new”. We are a stubborn collective, we human beings.

And our stubbornness brought Jesus all the way to a cross, his fork in the road. God could have turned off all the lavish love Jesus had shared with us up to that point. God could have said, “Forget humans, they’re too much trouble, let’s get another flood going.” But God didn’t. Instead, God decided that there, on that cross, working through Jesus, God would draw heaven and earth closer together, closer than divine love and earthly need had ever been up to that point. It was very simple, God’s love would continue to flow to us, through Jesus’ pierced hands and wounded side. As his injuries grew, as the pain he must have experienced grew stronger, there was only one word given, one clear statement for all of us hear: “He came that we may have life and have it abundantly.”

The first Saturday after Ina had come to live with us in our house, my parents called another impromptu meeting with my sister and me. “How’s it going?” they asked. My sister was gushing on and on about singing songs in Finnish, and cookies, and bedtime stories. She loved this new arrangement. A little, tiny bit of my stone-cold heart was still hanging on. I mumbled something like, “I guess it’s okay.”

Our mom, ever the Jesus conduit, told a little story: “I want you to know something. When Ina arrived, she had very little. Just a few clothes in a suitcase and even fewer coins in her pocket. We hadn’t even begun to pay her. Yet, that first day, while you were at school, she walked to the market, bought some flour, eggs,

chocolate chips; she came home, baked cookies for you, gave you milk, all to welcome you home on her first day here. You don't find that kind of love much in the world these days (it was 1972). Maybe we all might try celebrating it when it shows up on our doorstep and makes a place for itself in our home.

This little story of love making a place for itself, in my family's hearts, in our lives, in our home, is the same story we tell all throughout the Easter season. Of a love so present, so vibrant, so self-giving, that even death on a cross can't stop it.

On Ina's last day with us, as she prepared to move into a more permanent dwelling, with a family with a larger home, she baked and shared those same wonderful, delicious, chocolate chip cookies with us again. She said that things would be different, but we would always have her love. I think we even wanted to go with her, to be able to enjoy her smile (and cookies) just a few more times. It's hard to fathom, even now, how much her love changed our family, especially when our mom and dad were gone and working so much. It's hard to comprehend how much it changed me.

Jesus told his disciples, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'" No: we cannot come; we must stay. For, in Jesus' mind, what we do here, as bearers of his love, is far more important than any eternal bliss. As I received from Ina, so we all receive from Jesus: a love that fills us, flows through us, so that through us we might possibly change the course of the entire universe.

It's been many, long years now since Ina mummu left this earth to finally share in Jesus' heavenly bliss. But her love has not left. After her death, my family shared a plate of cookies in her honor, to remember her, to celebrate the love she had shared and which still flowed through us. Maybe, in the end, Ina would say that love really can change a family, change a church, change anything, change even an entire universe, but it will always happen one, chocolate chip cookie, at a time. **Amen.**