

People often ask me what happens in the Kairos prison retreat that I take part in at least once a year. I usually summarize it by mentioning the talks that are given, the focus on forgiveness, and the abundance of cookies. But that description is a bit too vague. You might think that the talks given are pretty powerful, and sometimes indeed they are. But what really makes the retreat work is *love*, pure and simple. And I think you'd agree that *talking* about love is not as effective as *demonstrating* love. You see, the retreat is really about what happens *in between* the talks.

Usually on Saturday, the third day of the retreat, right after lunch when everyone is a bit sleepy and dopey, the music team will strike up a song called Love Train. It's got a very driving beat, and soon enough, one of the outside volunteers grabs another guy and starts a live "train" of men holding onto the waist of the guy ahead. Everyone is encouraged to link up to the conga line and you can see the inmates looking around, wondering, "Can I do this? Is this OK?" Then they shrug and hook on, the train now 40, 50, 60 men long, moving through the prison gymnasium like a demented snake, everyone singing the song. Sometimes we even go outside into the prison yard and jaws drop everywhere you look. You can even see the officers in the guard towers wondering what the heck is going on. Is that legal? Can you do a love train in the prison? Let's check the manual! Eventually we end up back in the gym, the music stops, and everyone is laughing and catching their breath. It's a great moment, and the message is clear as a bell – love is a train – come and catch it!

Today's readings are all about the utterly unconventional, tradition breaking, mind boggling power of love. The first reading from Acts has Peter totally astonished. Remember that he is a good Jew, first, foremost, and in his mind, for now and ever more. The word "Christian" has not yet been coined – he and the disciples of Jesus are simply following "the way," a Jewish reform movement – not a new religion. The Jews are the Chosen People – God's favorites. But here before his very eyes he sees the Holy Spirit descend on the family of the house of Cornelius, a pagan! Peter utters these immortal words, "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality." So much for the Chosen People idea. God wants everyone in the fold it seems, and that is still hard for many of us to take!

Religious identity moves through stages. There are several theories that attempt to explain the stages of religious development. Some of the most famous are from Jean Piaget, James Fowler, and Erik Erikson. What you notice within each is a pattern of unfolding, a broadening of understanding as we move from early to later stages. In early stages of religious growth, we tend to focus on the rules and regulations. Our question is how to act within the framework of our identified faith. What is proper behavior? What should we believe? What sets us apart from other religions? We want to know how to tell who's in and who's out. It's comforting to be here – it answers our questions and keeps our minds quiet. This is the lure of the Jewish law, the lure of fundamentalism, the lure of a faith lived by the Catechism. But it doesn't work! Jesus fought this mentality constantly, and St. Paul summed it up nicely – living exclusively by the law leads to death. So what needs to happen instead?

The law shows us that we are never worthy. We continually fall short. The big “aha” moment is the realization that God loves us despite our failures. This is a sobering, often breathtaking moment in our spiritual growth. Our second reading from St. John illustrates this beautifully as he states, “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.” How could God love me like He does? When we see this reality, our focus on the fundamentals, the Catechism, the hierarchy, begins to break down. We question it all, and many folks fall into the lazy label of “spiritual but not religious”. It’s lazy because although it starts from a necessary truth it rarely moves into higher stages of religious identity. It stalls out, just when it is supposed to get interesting!

The gospel is all about the interesting part! Did you hear the invitation? Listen to what Jesus says: “Love one another as I love you. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.” And what does Jesus command? Love one another. The chain of love is simple: Father to Son to You to Others. Where people get stuck is in the nice feeling of Father to Son to Us. I’m loved, that’s cool. But limiting ourselves that way misses out on the *joy*. Joy comes when the chain is carried all the way through – Father to Son to You to *Others*. That’s the recipe for joy. Not fleeting happiness, not simply security, but deep-seated joy. Richard Rohr calls it an inner knowing – you see God in yourself and yourself in God. You find your soul. Religion at this stage is a bath of grace received and shared.

When I go down to the prison each month, the drive is always awful. It takes at least an hour, often an hour and a half to get to the gates. I arrive tired and frazzled more often than not. But after two hours sharing the love of God with the inmates, digging into the Bible, sharing questions, attempting answers, challenging ourselves to see God in everything, I walk out of that prison with an indescribable feeling of joy. I play some worship and praise music in the car and I sing all the way home. Not very well, believe me! But God doesn’t mind at all.

The love train is always in motion, always inviting you to latch on. Yes, it may seem a bit embarrassing and even, *gasp*, against the rules you’ve set up for your life. But Jesus is holding out his hand, even now, with an invitation to you personally. Listen again: “It is not you who choose me, but I who choose you and appoint you to go and bear fruit that will remain.”

Listen to James Fowler’s description of the last stage of faith, which he calls *Universalizing Faith*: “Few people reach this stage. Those who do live their lives to the full in service of others without any real worries or doubts.” Isn’t that what we all want? That’s the peace that the world cannot give. Join the love train!