

April 3, 2020

How Do We Show Our Love?

When I was fifteen, I received a guitar for Christmas. This was the most extravagant and cherished gift of my childhood. I immediately started to teach myself how to tune it and play chords. It was the perfect instrument to give voice to my teenage angst. I wrote songs—not particularly sophisticated ones—with lots of repetition about love found and lost.

Once I mastered three chords, one of the first songs I taught myself was, “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love” (also known as “We Are One in the Spirit”). This song was written in the 1960s by then-Catholic priest, the late Fr. Peter Scholtes. At the time he was leading a youth choir at St. Brendan’s on the South Side of Chicago. He was having trouble finding music for ecumenical, interracial events, so he wrote this one. It is inspired by John 13:35 and a phrase that was used to describe Christians of early Church: “Behold, how they love one another.”

The lyrics are:

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.

And we pray that our unity will one day be restored

And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.

Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

I don’t sing this song anymore for several reasons. One, the tune is a downer and the lyrics are a problem. Over the years, I have struggled with the label “Christian” because there are so many types of Christians, even though the media reduces it to one evangelical flavor. And that’s not me. This is where liberal Christians get stuck. We don’t want to shout about our love but hope that others experience it by our actions.

And then some verses should be added to this song so that we will know Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, Humanists and Atheists by their love, too.

Wouldn’t it be incredible if we could simply say this about humanity: that we embody a love so powerful, so inclusive, so unifying, so aflame that it lights the entire planet? *That* I could sing about. During this time of physical distancing and social connection, can we find some new ways to show our love? Will it be a virus that restores our unity? Maybe so.

Paula