

My bank sends me a birthday card every year. I am sure somewhere someone read that it's a nice thing to do as a personal touch. Most of the cards I receive get hung on the refrigerator or sit on the fireplace mantle for a while, so I can enjoy them. The one from the bank goes immediately to recycling because a generic card that is prompted by a computer that tells someone who does not know me from Adam to drop a card in the mail bin just doesn't feel very personal. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say it feels artificially personal.

There is something troubling about living in a world filled with artificial intimacy. There is something troubling about a world in which companies have to write policies to explain to their people how to make their customers think they care about them. Here's a novel idea, if you want your customers to think you care about them, actually care about them.

The church is called to be different from the world. At the close of the Letter to the Hebrews, the author lists a few marks of the Christian life. They are things that separate us from the world. He writes, "Keep loving one another as brothers and sisters." The New Testament often speaks of the church in terms of family. Jesus himself said that those who followed him were his brothers and sisters.

This can all sound very idyllic until you consider what loving one another as brothers and sisters is really like. Loving each other as friends is much easier, because we get to choose our friends. Brothers and sisters are bound together because of their parents. They have no choice. Our Heavenly Father has chosen us. He never asked our opinion about the other people He chose. Yet, in our love for Him, we can discover love for our brothers and sisters.

I've seen a lot of this kind of love at Advent. We don't accept each other on an equal basis. We accept each other on an individual basis. We know each other's weaknesses, and make room for each other's quirks. When someone is hurting, I've watched others gather around that person and support them. We don't always get it right, but it seems to come fairly naturally.

This love for our brothers and sisters is to spread beyond the local community, to our brothers and sisters throughout the world. Sadly, there have been many attempts for one segment of the church to separate from another segment of the church. The reality is that we cannot separate ourselves from any other Christian. They are part of the church whether we like it or not. They are God's sons and daughters, and, therefore, our brothers and sisters. Keep loving one another as brothers and sisters.

The second mark of the church is hospitality to strangers. In the early church, this was critical to the expansion of the church. As the apostles went out, they were dependent on the reception they received. There were few hotels, and those few were considered places of iniquity, so they stayed with other Christians, and were cared for on their mission.

When I was in college, I went to a church that had a special outreach to college students. There were families in the church that would invite the students to get away from the dorms for a while and eat a home cooked meal. Some of the families even invited us to do our laundry

while we were there. The real treat though was talking to people who seemed to have a real interest in us. They seemed to enjoy sharing a few hours getting to know us.

A couple of years ago, when a visiting professor from another country was with us, a few of you took the time to really get to know him. You hosted him for meals, and helped him find what he needed in the community. I am certain that had a profound influence on his view of the Christian Church. This was a place he could find the hospitality that is so rare in our world today. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.

A third mark of the Christian life is care for those who are in trouble. Specifically, the author speaks of those who had been imprisoned or tortured because they were Christians. When possible other Christians would pool their resources to purchase the freedom of their fellow Christians. When they could not do that, they would raise money to take food to them.

This is one of the reasons we support Voice of the Martyrs every year. We may not personally know people who are imprisoned for their faith, but we can support our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are suffering for the sake of the gospel.

We can also do this when we go to the Metanoia Hospitality Center to serve a meal and offer prayer for the people there. We do this when we go to Eliza Jennings to offer services for people whom much of the world has forgotten. We do this when a member of our church is in a financial pinch and we are able to help them through. Remember those who are in trouble as though you yourself were in that trouble.

A fourth mark of the church is fidelity. The author writes, "Let marriage be held in honor by all." In Ancient Rome, marriage was often more of a financial or political arrangement than a loving relationship. It was not uncommon in the upper classes for marriages to be dissolved if a better political or financial opportunity presented itself. As a result of that view of marriage, romantic relationship often took place outside of the marriage relationship. We aren't the first culture to have trouble with a high rate of divorce and infidelity.

There are legitimate reasons for the dissolution of a marriage. However, we live in a culture in which people will divorce because they hope that a change in spouses might help them find greater fulfillment and happiness, or, they will seek fulfillment and excitement in a relationship outside of their marriage. The church can show a better way. "Let marriage be held in honor by all."

Finally, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says that contentment is a mark of the church. I've seen a few articles recently about the dissatisfaction with life created by social media. When we see a steady stream of pictures of people having more fun than we are having, or achieving greater success than we feel like we have achieved, it's easy to become dissatisfied with life. The truth is most people have a pretty normal life. Don't let their press releases make you think that their life is always an exciting vacation or new pinnacle of achievement. No one posts things like, "I drove to work today, and nothing out of the ordinary happened."

You have the most exciting thing in the world. You have a relationship with the living God who has promised never to leave you nor forsake you. Let that relationship be the source of your security and contentment. Keep your eyes on Him, and not on what others have or do, and you will find genuine contentment.

These are the things the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us set us apart from the world. In a world where there is false intimacy, the church offers genuine relationships. In a world that looks away from those who are suffering, the church embraces those who are suffering to give them relief. In a world that is constantly seeking more, the church offers the one lasting source of joy and peace. In a world that so often proves to be false, the church offers what is unchanging and true.