

“Shocked”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
VI Easter – 17 May 2009
Acts 10:44-48; I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Casablanca is my favorite movie. The dialogue, the cinematography, and top-flight acting from a fabulous cast, all make it exceptional. But best parts of Casablanca are the instants of levity that help a very serious movie stay quite delightful. The best example comes two-thirds of the way through, right after the stirring singing of the French national anthem, *Le Marseilles*, at Rick’s Café.

An outraged Nazi, Major Strasser, recently arrived as liaison to Morocco from the Third Reich, ordered the French Prefect of Police to close the establishment. Captain Renault blows a whistle and instructs everyone to leave. As people grumble and depart, the proprietor, Monsieur Rick, played by Humphrey Bogart, steps up to the Police Captain, and demands to know, “How can you close me up? On what grounds?” Renault replies, “I’m shocked, shocked to find that gambling in going in here.” At that very moment, the casino pit boss approaches him with a wad of French francs. “Your winnings, sir.” Renault’s response, “Oh, thank you very much,” as he nonchalantly pockets the cash. In this case, the shock he declares is both feigned and hypocritical, which makes the whole scene so funny; rarely, though, does true shock evoke such a jocular emotion.

Many early Jewish Christians were shocked, shocked to find out that Peter was prepared to include Gentiles – non-Jewish persons – into their new covenant with Jesus. OK, the actual word used in the New Revised Standard Version to describe their unfavorable response is

“astonished,” but I think that close enough to “shocked” for me to my favorite movie into the sermon.

In the minds of many of the first followers of Jesus, he was **their** Messiah, foretold by **their** prophets, awaited faithfully by **their** ancestors. The idea that some pagan person who did not have a history with the one true God, who was probably marching up the steps to the temple of Athena only days before, could become of a equal and welcome part of **their** thing, well it just didn't fit.

Funny how they forgot how the bystanders were shocked, shocked when the wind and flame came down at Pentecost and enabled people from across half the known world to hear the proclamation of the Gospel in their language coming from the lips of ill-educated Apostles. One person in the crowd thought they were drunk, even though it was only 9:00 in the morning.

Funny how those first Christians frequently forgot how shocked they were, shocked to hear three days after the crucifixion that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Many of them simply couldn't believe it, until they saw Jesus for themselves. Of course, that resurrection shock was only the latest in a series of nasty surprises that weekend.

Imagine how shocked they must have felt to see Jesus nailed up to a cross. This is not what they had expected from a Messiah. They anticipated a conqueror that would liberate them from Roman oppression, not become a victim of it.

The Apostles themselves went through shock after shock. Surely, they were shocked to discover a traitor in their midst who betrayed the location of Jesus. In fact, they were shocked to learn from Jesus that he would be crucified, and raised from the dead. Again, not what they expected, but then, the miracles and all the other extraordinary things Jesus did, though expected

from a Messiah, must have still been a shock to witness. It must have been an emotionally turbulent couple of years on the road with Jesus.

You would think that, after a while, the followers of Jesus would become less prone to being shocked by Jesus, but evidently not. You would think that people's perceptions would be altered over time, the horizons of their imagination widened, so that every big event, every significant change, every disappointment of their cherished expectations would not come as a shock. But that seems not to have happened, at least for most people. Not that we're in any position to judge our predecessors in the faith.

Good Christians have continued to be shocked, throughout the centuries and up until this very day, by what Jesus does, or apparently wants done, within the life of the Church and the world. We continue to be shocked, shocked at how the Holy Spirit enflames us and whips us about, shocked at the audacity of the resurrection and the power of life, shocked at the vulgar cruelty of the crucifixion. But most of all, we remain shocked by love.

We have a love-hate relationship with this sensation of shock. In a society of thrill-seekers who climb cliffs without a tether and jump out of perfectly good airplanes with nothing but a scrap of silk to break their fall, in a culture awash with titillation of every kind, we enjoy the occasional shock, the surprise of the unexpected, provided that we **like** the shock. But we don't always like the shock, and when it comes to the gospel sometimes we feel ambiguous about being shocked.

Take love, for instance. On the one hand, we're big fans, but the closer we look into it, the more shocked we may find ourselves, and ambivalent. Love is a free choice, yet in the Gospel of John, Jesus commands it as a condition – actually, THE condition – for discipleship. That makes the choice of love a little less free, when you think about it.

Also, Jesus never precisely defines what love is. Perhaps we're meant to figure that out on our own, with the help of the Holy Spirit within the context of Christian community. If so, then how can we ever be sure, totally certain, that we're doing the loving thing in every instance?

Maybe we can't be sure, and that's why we have this thing called faith. But isn't it shocking that Jesus would simultaneously simplify the law by reducing it to a single word, "love," while making our lives infinitely more complex by leaving it up to us to discern the loving thing, time after time?

It's shocking that such frail and fallible creatures would be given such responsibility. In a way, we resent freedom, because it can make being a Christian terribly difficult. Sometimes, we don't know what the loving thing to do is, and we're torn. At others, we know what the loving thing is, but we don't want to do it, often because we know that others might find the loving thing we do shocking, even repulsive, like including someone heretofore thought impure and unworthy into the communion of Christ's discipleship, just as they are.

But what's really shocking about all of this is that John writes in his first letter that the commandment to love is "not burdensome," and even more shocking is the fact that he's right, because "for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith."

In other words, what conquers the world, what enables our proclamation of the Gospel, what helps us figure out more often than not what the loving thing is from day to day, what grants us the peace and courage to do that loving thing, is not our certainty, but the faith that fills in the gaps between what we know and what we don't, between what we think we know and what we can't possibly know.

It's funny how Jesus made everything so simple -- a single word, "love" -- and in the process made it so complex that we have no choice but to acknowledge our inability to fulfill his commandment without depending upon Jesus through faith. Now that's entertainment! We can only go free to the extent we're bound to Jesus.

It's also funny how often we take that for granted or choose to ignore it for the sake of convenience, or prefer our own certainties over the ambiguities of loving, except none of those choices are a "ha-ha" kind of funny.

The shock we feel when Jesus calls us to love, the shock we feel when we do it, may not be humorous, but it does bring levity into a serious situation, which makes life delightful. May we ever be shocked, and enjoy every minute of it, not scandalized by the surprises brought by the Spirit, but content to witness, to follow, and to bring into fruition the electric shock that is the Gospel. And may Jesus, here in our midst, always say as Captain Renault did, with perfect insincerity, "I'm shocked, shocked, to find that loving is going on here." Amen.