

On Monday there was a story on National Public Radio about a girl named Isabelle who was described by her mother as “chronically happy.”

Now that’s an odd phrase. Generally, we think of the term “chronic” in the context of things that are bad. A chronic illness or a chronic complainer... In fact, one of the definitions in my dictionary is “...constantly vexing, weakening or troubling.”

And for Isabelle’s mom, Jessica, Isabelle’s happiness was in fact constantly vexing and troubling. It turns out that Isabelle has something called Williams Syndrome. Williams Syndrome is a genetic disorder that causes a number of issues including smallness of stature and cognitive delays. But another component of Williams Syndrome is that those who have it are pathologically trusting. Literally. Because of what researchers believe to be a problem in their limbic system, it is essentially biologically impossible for children like Isabelle to distrust. Jessica explained that Isabelle doesn’t have that evolutionary impulse toward caution, she doesn’t have what might be called, “an early-warning system.”

For example, when Isabelle was 7, she and her family were spending the day at the beach. Isabelle wanted to go to Dairy Queen but Jessica had been putting her off. Isabelle heard another woman telling her kids, “It’s time to go to Dairy Queen.” So Isabelle just went and got into the woman’s van. Jessica had no idea where she was and was frantically searching the beach when the woman brought Isabelle back. The woman had been about to drive away and glancing in the rear view mirror to reverse her vehicle, saw a strange little girl sitting in her car.

For Jessica right now, life is complicated as she works to keep Isabelle safe. But experts tell her it will get easier as Isabelle gets older. It won't be that she learns to distrust, but rather that she will be able to learn a set of skills that will allow her to manage her world safely.

Isabelle needs to learn to love a little less.

But I think that for the most part, we adults need to learn to love a little more. I think it's very possible that we have gotten a little too skilled at implementing our early-warning system and keeping other people at arms length.

So, Isabelle's story got me to wondering, what do we risk if we love too much?

I think most of us, by the time we are into our adult life, have had the experience of loving someone else more than they loved us and we've been hurt by that. For some of us, this has maybe happened more than once. And so we get cautious, thinking that we'll be more careful next time. We'll hold back and let someone else take the risk for a change. We'll keep ourselves safe for a while, test the waters a little longer, wait and see...

Or maybe we've reached out in love and trust to another and found that love abused. Someone lied to us, or used us, or cheated us. Someone took our willingness to care and treated it like a worthless little bauble, a trinket to be used and thrown away.

Maybe we found ourselves caring for too many people while not taking enough time to take care of ourselves and found that we got burned out and tired. Maybe we're careful about loving because we are afraid more will be expected of us than we'll be able to give—that our ability to give is a limited resource that could be used up before we know it.

Or maybe we've come to think that we just don't have the time or emotional space to love any more people than those already in our lives.

Our caution may be borne out of hard-won experience and it may keep us safe and secure, but it's also very possible that our caution gets in the way of Jesus' command to love one another.

That's what we hear in today's gospel text. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

This is a call to love that John repeats again in the 15th chapter, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Now, the love that Jesus is talking about isn't a lovey-dovey, feel-good emotion. It's not the kind of love that would be the makings of a Hollywood movie—good for a Friday night date. It's not about feeling at all. The love that Jesus is talkin' about is all about doing.

Because we're supposed to love him as he loved us. And we might think that the gospel writer is talking about Jesus' kind words and acts of healing. We might think the gospel writer is talking about Jesus' teaching and Jesus' care for others. And if we thought that, it wouldn't be all bad, but it would be wrong.

Because in the beginning of the 13th chapter, the gospel writer tells us of Jesus, "...having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." And that text from the 15th chapter continues on to say, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The way that Jesus' loved his disciples was to die for them. And he tells them that they should love one another in that same way.

The Reverend Joachim Alexandropoulos was an Orthodox priest on a Greek isle in World War II, now memorialized at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. The Nazis came one day, demanding that he provide them, the next day, with a list naming every Jew on the

island. The next day he handed them a list containing only one name, his own. This priest was ready to love as Jesus had loved.

But that kind of love—a self-giving love all the way to giving of our lives—is not a love that most of us will be called to over the span of our lives. We're not likely to be in a situation where we would give our lives for someone else.

But I don't think that a willingness to die for another is all it means to love so that we would lay down our lives.

Laying down our lives may mean putting someone else's needs ahead of our own.

Laying down our lives maybe means putting aside our need to be right for the sake of another's need to be heard.

Laying down our life could mean loving another in a way that lifts them up rather than seeks our own gain.

Laying down our life may mean sacrificing some of what we have for the sake of one who has less.

Laying down our life to love someone else could mean taking a risk. A risk that we could be hurt, again. A risk that someone might take advantage of us, a risk that we might use up more of our resources than we intended to, a risk that we might give up some of our precious and carefully preserved time and emotional space.

This is a love like the love that Jesus has for us. A love that Jesus has known from the Father. A love that reaches down to bring the other up. A love that acts rather than exists. A love that is a verb, not a noun, a love that does rather than feels.

Jesus goes on to tell the disciples that if they love that way, as he has loved them, then everyone will know they are his disciples. They will be known as Jesus followers by their

actions. It's a kind of love that says something about what they believe and to whom they belong. It's the kind of love that we wear like a marker as it not only touches those who are loved, but it witnesses to the way we have been loved ourselves.

One of my commentaries related a story from Isak Dinesen's book, *Out of Africa*. In the book there is a story about a boy named Kitau. "He appeared at the author's door one day to ask for a job as a domestic servant. She hired him but was surprised when after three months he asked her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim who lived in a nearby town. Dinesen offered to raise Kitau's pay in order to keep him, but money was not his interest. Kitau had decided to become either a Christian or a Muslim, and his purpose in working for Dinesen had been to see, up close, the way a Christian lived. Now that he had worked for Dinesen and seen the ways of Christians, he would go and observe Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behave; then he would decide. The author remembers how she wished Kitau had told her that before he came to live with her."

Our love says something about our faith, about the one to whom we belong, about the way we have been loved. And loving others with generosity and trust speaks to the God who created us, redeemed us and who empowers us to love as we have been loved.

But loving knowing that we could be hurt is hard—and it's not always the right thing to do. Accepting hurts from others may enable behaviors that aren't healthy and may put us in danger. Loving knowing that others may take advantage of us is not always the right choice to make. Sometimes tough love at the right time will help others find their way when they are lost. Sometimes straight talk, given thoughtfully, instead of a raft of kind words that beat around the bush is the most caring approach. And loving so we use up our own personal resources is not going to leave us ready or able to love again.

But holding back each time in the event that these things *might* happen is not necessarily right either. It's possible that erring on the side of caution might mean that we err on the side of selfishness a time too many—and lose the sense of how to love in the way we have been called to love.

Better that we find ourselves chronically happy and loving a little too much than that we forget how to love all together.

And I think we can strengthen our ability to love through the practices of our faith.

By coming together in community praise God and to celebrate and care for one another—to love one another. Remembering milestones of life and faith with prayer and tangible gifts like blankets and bibles and pillows.

By giving generously from what we have first been given, including working together to collect more food than we might have imagined we could.

By reading and remembering God's promises to us in scripture and talking together about how those promises have been made real in our own lives.

By praying to God to help us to know the love of Jesus Christ made real in our own lives. A love that went all the way to the cross so that we might walk in newness of life, freed from our own brokenness and the brokenness of the world.

By sharing in the meal that is God's love present for us in Jesus' body and blood—the bread and the wine—our common experience of a love that is so real we can taste it.

Strengthened in these ways we can find our way through our complex and complicated world, loving in the way that God calls us to love, loving in the way that Jesus loved us, loving with a love that is not our own, but that comes from God—endless and everlasting.