

Loving Ray

What to do when someone doesn't change

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I met Ray at Sunday church. I heard he wanted a ride to the weekly home church that I attended, so I offered. Each week I gave him a ride. Each week I learned more about him.

At first sight, one knew he was different. He had a massive nest of black, bushy hair. I would have called it an Afro, but it was far more unruly than that. He was overweight and wore baggy clothes. His arms hung loose and jiggled when he walked, causing his hands to flap forward at the wrists. His most unusual trait was that his eyes constantly darted as though he were assessing the threat of every person in the room. I soon learned he had a large helping of paranoia. His primary obsession was the "demon people." These malevolent beings were always telling him what not to do.

When I would pick up Ray to go grocery shopping, he would say, "Oh, no. The demon people don't want me to leave the house." After I convinced Ray it was okay to go shopping, then on the drive home he would decipher the license plate of the car in front of us. License plates were always bad news. "Oh, no. The license plate is telling me that I shouldn't have bought the candy bar."

By now, you must have deduced that Ray was not mentally stable. He didn't work and couldn't work. He lived by himself in section-eight housing. Twice a week, he attended compulsory "socialization" where others like him came together for planned activities. His apartment was filthy. His hygiene was lacking. His diet was atrocious.

Frustrating Behaviors

At weekly home church, eight of us met in the leader's home. Ray would eat the snacks and then doze on the couch while the group discussed the Bible. This happened every time. Ray had more interest in food than in the Bible. It frustrated the hell out of the leader.

Ray frustrated me, too. Every time I saw Ray, I needed to remind him to not listen to the demon people. "Don't pay attention to what they say. They don't have your best interests in mind. They never say anything good or helpful." Ray would hang his head and say, "You're right. I shouldn't listen." But ten minutes later, he would be listening to them and getting worked up. And I

would lecture him again. I believed that if I repeated myself enough times, Ray would get it. That never happened.

Ray's Purpose

I didn't know what to do about Ray. He was already on medications. He had case-workers who were trying their best to help him. I prayed for him. I also prayed for myself, that I would be more patient. One day, God said, "Ray will never change. Will you love him anyway?" It floored me to hear God say that someone would never change. I suppose I was naïve, thinking that people ought to change. I had seen people change, especially in response to prayer. What is the point of a life if that life never changes? The question wasn't directed to God, but He answered. "The point of Ray's life is to teach others to love."

God had pressed my reset button. I staggered to reorient myself to this new information. The measure of life wasn't about its impact on the person who lived it, but about its impact on those people who are affected by it. All of us have heard inspirational stories about people who have touched the lives of others, but what about those people who challenge us to be better? Ray's life did have a purpose. Ray was God's gift to me to teach me about unconditional love.

Easier Love

Things changed for me from that point on. I no longer expected Ray to change. Can you imagine how freeing that was for me? I knew I would have to repeat myself to Ray uncountable times, but that was okay. It became a given, like brushing my teeth. I became more patient with Ray. My earlier frustration was due to my expectation that Ray should change. With that expectation gone, I had little cause to get frustrated. No one expects newborns to do a whole lot, so their parents tend to be extra patient. As expectation increases, so does our impatience.

I found it easier to bear with Ray, to listen to Ray, to let Ray be Ray without any conditions. My job was to simply love him, not try to change him. So often, our love has conditions. But unconditional love values what is and has no agenda or expectations. What surprised me was that Ray's quirks became

more endearing to me. These odd mannerisms defined him as a unique person. When a puppy chases its tail, we deem it peculiar or silly, but that behavior is part of the whole package that we can love.

God's Gift

Ray was a person who chased his tail, a puppy who would never grow up. We tend to be less tolerant of people than pets. We expect people to be grown up and act a certain way. When they don't fit our expectations, we shun them. But it may be that God has placed these people in our lives to show us that our love is conditional and to give us an opportunity to practice unconditional love.

In the months that followed, I would watch the leader of our weekly home church get increasingly impatient and frustrated with Ray. I would smile and wonder whether the leader would ever see Ray as a gift from God to teach him how to love.

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