

Disparate sources, unconditional love

So what do Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu and Despina Siskos have in common? They both discovered that unconditional love is the way to joy.

We know Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu best as Mother Teresa. The Aug. 25 edition of The Baltimore Sun included a column by Elizabeth Dole, a former U.S. Senator and president of the American Red Cross. The article was headlined “The Triumph of Joy.” It was written on the occasion of Mother Teresa’s 100th birthday. The headline was occasioned by a quote from a man who was at Mother Teresa’s house in Calcutta when she died in 1997. The man said simply, “She was a source of perpetual joy.”

Ironically, as I turned the page of the newspaper, I was faced with the obituary of Despina Siskos, a 15-year-old Rosedale resident, who died while awaiting a lung transplant. She was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. As I read the article I was moved by one quote especially: “She loved unconditionally,” said her aunt, Karen Kontoudis. “She just couldn’t see the bad in people.”

The juxtaposition of these two items seemed more than a coincidence. As I have said so often, there are no coincidences. Or, as someone else said: “Coincidence is when God remains anonymous.”

These two lives were so dramatically different, and yet so essentially similar. They were different in that the whole world knew of Mother Teresa. The world hardly knew Despina Siskos. And, yet, they both arrived at the same essential conclusion: The secret of joy is unconditional love.

The word love is so used and abused that what it really means is hardly recognizable. What we usually call love is typically “romantic love.” Romance is wonderful, surely one of God’s gifts to humanity in this “vale of tears.” Yet, romantic love is essentially feeling rather than commitment. As all the studies indicate, romantic love, the initial physical and psychological attraction, lasts about 16 to 22

months. Then, when the “high” of the good feeling wears off, there’s a chance for real love to develop.

Too often, however, in our culture romance is just another name for selfishness. I “love” you as long as you make me feel good. When you stop making me feel good, I want “out,” or I want somebody else.

True love, what Jesus would speak about, is what the Greeks would call agape – unconditional acceptance of the other just as he or she is. This kind of love, the real love, is not based on feelings but on commitment, on a decision to “befriend” the other in good times and bad, sickness and health.

Agape, however, is more than just love for this person, or family, or group. It’s unconditional acceptance of everyone. Mother Teresa had it. She saw Christ in everyone, “Christ in his most distressing disguises.” So did Despina. She didn’t know how to see the bad in anyone.

Someone once asked Abraham Lincoln how tall a man should be. He replied, “A man’s legs should be long enough to reach the ground.” How long should a person’s life be? Just long enough to touch the joy of loving unconditionally. A little girl, and an older lady, continents apart and cultures apart, both found it. Not coincidentally, they were both people of faith.

Mother Teresa once described herself as a little pencil in the hand of God. Would that we would all allow God to live in us and through us. Then we would know unconditional love. Then we would know lasting joy.

Allow me to give Mother Teresa the last word: “At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by ‘I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless and you took me in.’ ”