

Love over hate

Frequently on a Sunday afternoon I'll visit one of the local parks. I enjoy watching people feeding the ducks, and, recently, watching the ducks "pair off." Even more recently I've seen a fair number of ducklings, the result of those pairings. Geese mate for life. I don't think ducks do.

I enjoy walking through the thick grass, and seeing various other creatures around. There seem to be dozens of squirrels. Birds seem to abound as well. It's not exactly hiking in the Rockies, but it is my way of staying in touch with nature. As the poet William Wordsworth once said: "One impulse from a vernal wood can tell you more of man than all the sages can."

I also learn a lot about people from the ways their dogs react. All of my life I've loved dogs. Cats are a later life love. If I see a dog, I'll often ask the people if I can pet the animal. Almost unanimously I receive a yes.

Recently, however, there was an exception. As I walked I noticed a pit bull at one table. I didn't walk at him, but I did walk fairly close to him. Without warning the dog leaped up, snarled and jumped at me. Fortunately, the dog was chained to the picnic table. I've never been afraid of dogs, but I was afraid of that one.

The owner noticed my reaction and asked if I was OK. I guess he feared that I was going to have a stroke or heart attack. From a now-safe distance I assured him that, yes, I was OK.

In fact, I was not OK. I was angry. Yes, I was angry at the dog, but even more at the owner. That dog had clearly been mistreated, and I felt sorry for the animal.

The following Sunday I was again at the same park. This time I noticed a young couple with three pit bulls. The man was walking two of them, and the third dog was seated with the woman at a picnic bench. I walked over and asked her if I could pet her dog. She said: "Sure." As I got down on the ground to pet this first pit bull, the dog rolled over and invited me to scratch his tummy. When the other two pit bulls arrived momentarily, they were just as friendly. They had the gentleness of golden retrievers rather than the stereotype of pit bulls.

My friend, Liz Ackerman, actually runs a pit bull rescue. Whenever we walk one of the dogs, I always manage to walk on “the other side” of Liz. Prudence is still a virtue.

Yes, sadly, pit bulls have often been bred to fight. They are often raised harshly and cruelly to make them mean. The problem is not with the dogs, but with the breeders.

As noted, dogs do respond to love. And so do people.

As I thought about the pit bulls, I also thought about terrorists. One of the great lines uttered by a clergyman after the May terrorist attack that took children in Manchester, England was: “Terror cannot win because love is always stronger than hate.”

Love is not weak. It doesn’t mean we don’t resist terrorists. It means that we don’t let their hatred get into our hearts. Jesus was the object of terror and hatred when he hung upon the cross. But it was the power of terror and hatred that died on the cross. It was love that raised Jesus above hatred and terror.

Evangelization doesn’t simply mean getting someone to join our faith or our church. Evangelization is helping people to have such a relationship with Jesus that love becomes the heart of our lives. Evil has a way of reinventing itself in every generation. But every manifestation is ultimately defeated. Love, however, lasts through all generations. Love keeps the poison of terror from poisoning our lives.

And love works for dogs – as well as for people.

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