

Sunday, November 6, 2016
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For those of you who don't know, I'm currently attending Lancaster Theological Seminary, pursuing a Masters of Divinity. From what I understand, it's a fairly practical degree – practical, that is, as opposed to academic: preparation for service, instead of for study and teaching. It's the degree for those seeking to be pastors. Ministers. Chaplains. Spiritual directors. Directors of nonprofit organizations. Community organizers.

If someone had come up to me even two years ago, and told me that I would be enrolled in seminary for an M.Div, I would have straight up laughed in that person's face. "Ha ha ha... Get out. No really, get out of my presence. It's not gonna happen. I'm not religious."

If, however, you'd told me that I'd be spending my time pondering the kinds of questions in which I'm now immersed... I honestly don't know how I would have reacted. Except I know it would not have been dismissive.

Because even then – even as a “non-religious” individual who didn't need the Bible, or the Church, or any of that mess – I asked those big questions. Questions around what it means to be a good person. Questions on responsibility to society versus self. Questions about the nature of trust and of faith.

For those who like Scripture, in Luke 10:27-28 Jesus summarizes the Biblical path to righteousness: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength, and all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. Do this habitually, and you will live.” But that begs the question – what does that look like? Especially now, as our community blindly meanders through the process of discerning whether it's better to explicitly demonize and attack the Other here in our midst so that we can convince ourselves that we've brought America under control again, or if it's sufficient to simply continue the ongoing but out-of-sight process of bombing the hell out of “those wrong folks over there”. If I dehumanize someone enough – through mockery, manipulation, and menace, do they eventually not count as my neighbor, so that I don't have to love them? Do more guns and bigger bombs and faster drones increase our strength so that we can love God better? In this context – our context – what **is** love, and who deserves it (besides God, the American flag, and apple pie)?

These are questions that transcend religious tradition – these are questions that cut to the heart of who we are, individually and as a society.

When my parents came to pick me up from school during my freshman year of college, my mother let me know that she had found my older brother, Rob – born six years before me, and given up for adoption. I'd always known he'd existed – the phantom playmate and protector that I'd wished for but never had – suddenly he became real, shifted from ether to flesh by my mother's words. In addition, I found out that he was gay. I didn't really know what gay meant then. I was aware that such a thing existed, but it meant nothing. That experience – that was other. It had nothing to do with me. And then suddenly, it had everything to do with me. I remember hearing his anguished description of self-realization – the fear of discovery, abandonment, and potential harm, the fear of loss of connection and community. The fear of

exile. A brutal self-examination, cross-examination in practice for the court of public opinion: “Are you SURE that you’re gay? Have you TRIED being NOT gay? Prove it!” The pain and jealousy of watching straight folks blithely going about their lives, fitting in – no anguish, fear, or soul-searching required.

Straight folks like me.

That ripped me open – of course I’d never stopped to consider if I was straight! Why would I? Wasn’t that what I was supposed to be? Which, of course, was Rob’s point – how could I even understand what he had gone through, when society had no expectation that anyone *like me* should go through that? But how could I understand him – how could I *love* him – if I wasn’t willing to go through what he went through? So, I tried questioning my sexuality. I tried asking myself, “Are you SURE that you’re straight? Have you TRIED being NOT straight? Prove it!”

It was a tough six weeks.

I’m serious. It was uncomfortable and disorienting. I found myself questioning lots of assumptions that had ruled my life! I couldn’t prove it to myself that I wasn’t gay – that I hadn’t just been conditioned and brain-washed by society to interpret all of that evidence so as to fit in – to better hit all the “right” check-box that I hadn’t even known I’d been hitting. Eventually, I ended up having to go with what felt right – I like women – but even today I occasionally wonder: “If the right man came along....?” Perhaps that was a tiny, fleeting glimpse into what people who aren’t straight – who don’t fit – go through. I don’t – and perhaps can’t – know. However, I do know what it felt like for six weeks; I can’t imagine going through something like that year after year after year. It hurts to even think about it.

Being ripped open like that – having your heart torn in two, to make room for someone else’s experience – I would guess that something like that has happened to all of us at some point. A times when we see – truly witness in the fullest sense of the word – someone else’s experience of the world, and it hits us so hard that we can’t help but be broken by it. I’ve seen people go through it – in anti-racism trainings; visiting nursing homes; sitting with the sick and dying and those grieving with them; spending time with the destitute here in the US or in other countries abroad. Sometimes it comes in a searing flash, and sometimes it’s agonizingly slow, but the knowledge comes – we are not that different – and they split with awareness. They know – *this* is my neighbor. And that’s the end of the story, right? We felt something – had some deep compassion for someone else’s suffering! Awesome job, team – hit the showers, and then let’s grab some brewskies! Mission accomplished – neighbor loved!

There’s a saying – “Love is a verb.” It’s not enough to simply *feel* something, we’re supposed to do something too. Back to the Bible: John the Baptist, in Luke 3:11–14, says, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Easy enough, right? Buy a coat and a few cans of food, and drop ‘em off at the collection point. Why, I’ll even drop a few bucks in the kettle as I leave the store – whatever was left over after buying gifts for the people that matter: friends and family – you know, my *real* neighbors.

Having gone through so much heartache to make room for the other, time and society are careful to stitch us closed again – piecing together the rough edges and making sure to leave no

gaps through which such compassion might seep through. We have to save our resources for the “right” people – the ones who fit into all the “right” check-boxes. The ones who have proved themselves worthy of being considered neighbors.

Is there a way, as our readings suggest, to keep that space open? To leave a few gaps, a little bit of room, where we can not only accommodate but welcome the Other into us? To bring them into that raw space, to honor them and hold them in the way we ourselves would like to be honored and held? To recognize that their experience is not so different than our experience? To truly see and hear them, to not just witness them, and to witness for them, in the ways that we would like others to witness us and for us? To recognize and echo their humanity?

This is more than buying someone coats and food; this goes beyond dropping a few bucks into a kettle. This is love in a deep and abiding way, that cuts into your life and forces you to do things differently.

Theologians talk about “agape love” – a kind of love that is generous, selfless, and charitable; “Jesus love” or “Godly love”. As an agnostic, however, I’m... skeptical. Self-sacrificial love – the kind where you’re willing to hang on a cross for someone else’s benefit – sounds a lot more like self-abuse than love. Feminist theology in particular has strongly interrogated this kind of message for decades, and for good reason – society has used this idea of self-sacrifice to propagate dangerous models of behavior for women. In the words of Rebecca Ann Parker:

“Women are culturally conditioned to care for others, but not ourselves. We believe that having needs, feelings, ambitions, or thoughts of our own is not good. ... Christian theology presents Jesus as the model of self-sacrificing love and persuades us to believe that sexism is divinely sanctioned. We are tied to the virtue of self-sacrifice, often hidden by threats of social punishment. We keep silent about rape, we deny when we are being abused, and we allow our lives to be consumed by the trivial and by our preoccupation with others. We never claim our lives as our own.”¹

Society controls by sewing all the edges shut against the Other; it also controls by ripping some of us so open that we can’t hold to ourselves. Is there a way between – a place where we can invite another to join us without losing our sense of self? Can we see and love others, without closing ourselves down to the point of shutting off or opening ourselves up to the point of self-sacrifice?

I don’t know the answer to that – honestly, recognizing that I don’t have all the answers is the biggest reason I call myself agnostic – but I’d be a poor speaker if I left things there. So let me instead leave you with the germ of an idea – a tiny bit of a suggestion, if you will. And it starts with that question, “what is love?”

I would argue that when we bring up love – especially in the context of being a good neighbor – what we’re talking about something much deeper than how we feel within ourselves. It’s not just about what goes on inside of us, but also what we want to go on inside of the other. When we say that we love someone, what we’re really trying to express is a desire that that that person *feels loved*. That’s why we talk about love as a verb – there has to be some expression of our intentions in the world for the other person to experience. That’s why we get upset when

we've gone out of our way for someone, and they don't respond with gratitude. We didn't get the feedback that we wanted – that they experienced our “love as a verb” as we intended.

I find that saying, “love as a verb,” to be problematic – precisely because it implies that we can control the outcome – that we can control how someone else experiences us! We have expectation of how someone else should respond to our efforts... but what if they don't respond that way? Whose fault is that, theirs or yours?

One of my colleagues at the seminary is a big proponent of “both/and,” but I like to also hold onto “neither/nor.” And in this case, I think it's appropriate. Love, when truly focused upon the other's feelings, relinquishes control of the outcome, but not of the process. It allows the other person to have an opinion about your actions even as you hold the reins of choice on the actions themselves.

In other words, maybe love isn't something that's given. Maybe it's a state of existence – a place

1 Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Anne Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 36.

that's shared, and something that can only be experience in communion with others. Something that is more like a conversation than a passed coat or a broken piece of bread. Maybe it's something that can only exist in the space between people as they share their experiences with others, and, in turn, are open to the shared experiences of others. If that's the case, then love requires us to be like cups – open enough to be able to catch, but closed enough to not spill. Open enough to honor, but closed enough to hold. We can still offer the coat, or the food, or the money, but we have to be willing to back it up – to hear the reaction and response. After all, they may not need a coat, or food, or money. Maybe love isn't so much about giving stuff, but instead about choosing to be radically present to both others and ourselves, and in turn responding to others when they are radically present with us. Maybe love, at its root, is a willingness to find commonalities in our experiences as we interact through fellowship. Maybe love is simply the liberal generosity of creating a shared identity, despite obvious difference.

Is that definition of love expansive enough to provide answers to all of the big questions I've been pondering? I doubt it. But I think – I hope – that it is enough to start a conversation.