

“Have the Same Mind in You”
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The desire to be seen, to be cherished, and to be loved are among the deepest of human needs. If these fundamental needs remain unmet, especially in childhood, we are deprived of vital and vitalizing forces essential to life. Too much of adult life is then spent coping with loss and attempting to find compensation for what remains unfulfilled.

I am not up on my evolutionary biology, and I am certain that there are biological reasons that would explain why human beings need love as much as we need food, but speaking in a theological idiom, in the language of faith, I want to say that these are also longings of the spirit.

Spiritual longings cannot be reduced to biology or evolutionary imperative alone. Something more is at work. The word “spirit” is a way to talk about this “something more” despite the fact that spirit talk is fraught with problems. The main trouble with the term “spirit” is that it is vulnerable to dualism. So, for instance, custodians of religious institutions have for millennia urged their followers to forsake bodily longings for the sake of spiritual ones. Such discourse divides persons against themselves imperiling prospects for health and integration. The first casualty of such talk is sex and our identity as sexual beings. Our own beloved St. Augustine had much trouble on this front, as he felt called to surrender his concubine whom he dearly loved in order to pursue a spiritual life given over to God. If sex is the first casualty of careless talk about spiritual desires, the second is often women who are said to be closer to the body whereas men are supposedly closer to the spirit. Spirit talk is risky because it is too often used to serve ends that do not make for healing.

But I do not know of any spiritual longings that are not also longings of the body. To say that the longing to be seen, to be loved, and to be celebrated are spiritual desires is to say that they are *comprehensive desires*. All that is in us desires to be seen and to be loved, to feel like we matter. These are surely bodily, but in these bodily desires, something more shines through. Not something other than the body but something more,

something that gives life to the body itself, that sustains the body, but cannot be reduced to “mere biological drives” alone.

The needs for recognition and love are so basic to human life that we will do virtually anything to have them met. Even a well-fed body whose biological needs are met remains a body in peril if it is not also nourished by love which alone meets our deepest desire to feel like we matter. The following sentence is as literally true as any human or religious statement can be: Love keeps us alive. Love enlivens.

The great tragedy in human life is that our need for recognition and love often goes unmet. Still worse, sometimes the spiritual soil in our hearts, the site of love’s reception, is so eroded that the soil seems to lose its very capacity to take in and absorb love. That is the predicament of those who have not only suffered from neglect or inattention but assault and violence. Those of us who have been injured by such violence find it virtually impossible to receive care and to believe genuinely that they deserve and merit care. Our capacity to unfold and flower is gravely compromised. In genuinely desperate cases, the spiritual soil of the heart has been rendered toxic by the radioactivity of violence and abuse. In the worst cases, the heart space is not only barren but becomes a breeding ground for the weeds of manipulation, rage and violence and the cycle if violence is perpetuated.

This wounding of our capacity to trust and receive love, the very resource we need to come alive, lies at the very heart of the human predicament. We human beings routinely experience ourselves as finite, fragile, and easily prone to injury. And after the wounding of neglect or trauma, we are ingenious in our innumerable attempts to compensate for the injuries we have suffered. The word “sin,” if we are to use it at all, is the term Christians use to name all the ways in which we inauthentically seek to protect ourselves from further harm and injury and all the desperate ways in which we perpetuate further injury, either through indifference or through toxic violence.

Using the language of sin, though, is risky as it can itself serve to perpetuate wounding and injury. To tell those who are already suffering from neglect, injury and violence that they are sinners without worth in the eyes of God is the church’s way of aggravating a wound that is already raw, bleeding, and open. The way in which we have used the language of sin has been anything but redemptive and healing. We have

forgotten that the term is best understood as a diagnosis of our predicament and not a description of what we essentially are. Sin is the state of separation from what we are created and meant to be, separation from each other, and separation from the eternal well-spring of Love that longs to burst forth in self-giving from within in order to irrigate the barren landscape of our broken hearts. Sin is a term we use to describe what happens when we fragile creatures are wounded and thereby separated from our innate capacities to love and to be loved.

We risk grave harm when we speak as though “sin” is the lens by which God sees us. To suggest that God sees us as with the eyes of judgment as without worth and deserving of infinite condemnation is to forget that God is our Mother, the one who has birthed us in Her own image and so has never forgotten that we are made and meant for love. Our origins are in love, our lives are sustained by love, and our one true end is love.

The tragedy of the human predicament is that we live as though none of this were true. We do not see that Love is like the very oxygen we breathe, the very atmosphere we inhabit, for it is in Love that we move, and dwell and have our being. To shift our metaphors from soil to air, we are like asthmatics whose lungs prevent us from taking in the very sustenance we so desperately need.

Sadly, the human predicament is not just marked by cycles of individual injury and violence. We also organize our social, cultural, economic, and political lives according to the limited range of possibilities that occur to a people of wounded imaginations. In economic life, we structure our lives toward inequity and the competition of each against all forsaking any commitment to equity and the common good. We institutionalize our injuries in justice systems marked by violence and even murderous execution. Our political life is rife with posturing and aggression, and far too many of us identify as most powerful those “leaders” who are most violent.

Even in our cultural lives, in our music and in our art, too often what comes to expression is rooted not in our deepest desire to love and be loved but instead in the distorted manifestations of our wounds. We resort to cultural goods so that we might become visible, find recognition, and feel like we matter. The trouble is that our longings and their cultural expression are ambiguous. Every one of our activities, our work lives, our song writing, and our music making can be exercises in authenticity or a masquerade.

Our work and even our ordinary daily activities can be marked by honesty or evasion, by transparency or by opacity and hardening.

Our deepest longings, however holy, bear the marks of our woundedness. But it is not our woundedness that compromises our cultural productions. Far from it. The deepest music and the most powerful writing are often honest expressions of our hurt, of our sense of disorientation and invisibility, and in this radical honesty, great healing power is already at work. Everything hinges on what we do with the wounds that we bear. The question is whether we will act out our wounds or whether we will seek to name them and so give expression for our deepest desire for healing.

We act out our own wounds when we seek fame, power, wealth, and high office in order to be seen and to be loved, in order to find compensation for what was denied us. Such efforts are, of course, doomed to fail. The artificial can never stand in for the true and self-aggrandizement can never substitute for what a touch can do. But it is the way of the world to seek refuge in false consolations to bind up our wounds. For the wounded, the call to love, the only true healing balm, is far too frightening. For love invites us to perform what feels like self-loss when it invites us to kenosis, to self-emptying.

The whole of the Christ event, the life, death and resurrection, give us another vision of life. In the life of Jesus the Christ, divine love becomes enfleshed and enters the human condition in order to water and nourish the dry and depleted soil of our wounded hearts. In the life of this man Jesus, we learn of one, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.”

These famous words from our reading may not be Paul’s own. The scholarly consensus seems to be that Paul is quoting from a song in the early Christian community’s hymnal. Scholars refer to this hymn as the “kenosis” hymn for the central Greek word in this text, “*ekenosen*” for self-emptying. This one word has been the subject of countless interpretations and countless books. Death of God theologians love it as do Buddhists. Feminists, by contrast, have been less than enthusiastic and even wary.

The profound feminist worry about the verse is well known: the call to sacrifice oneself as Christ sacrificed himself has been distorted by some to rationalize subservience. Women, in particular, have been asked to empty themselves for the sake of the controlling and manipulative men in their lives. The dangerous uses to which this verse has been put has led some to suggest that we would be best advised only to turn to the verse with caution or perhaps to leave it aside entirely.

These verses also sound especially dangerous to those who already feel empty, unloved, ignored and abused. If you already feel vulnerable, wounded and empty, then the invitation to further emptying can feel deeply threatening. Given these urgent concerns, can we really talk about self-emptying? Should we? In order to answer this question, let's look at the expanded context of the verse. Paul writes:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love.... 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.

Paul begins not with words of command but with words of invitation. If you believers have experienced the consoling power of love in Jesus the Christ and the Holy Spirit, then give yourselves to each other in love. Be of the same mind, having the same love. Be the authentic community of love that God invites the church to be. Give up those ways of being that are marks of your woundedness. Surrender selfish ambition and conceit, and look after the interests of others. Give yourself in service to each other by emptying yourself for the sake of others. In this way, you will be reborn, resurrected and exalted.

These are lovely and powerful words but they are also likely to be frightening and counterintuitive for those of us—and here, I really mean all of us—who, because of injuries suffered in the past habitually now dwell in postures of self-protection. We are curved in upon ourselves not because we are fundamentally wicked but because we find it hard to trust Love, to give ourselves over to Love. Our capacities for love are atrophied from fear and isolation.

But Paul's words remind us that Christians are called to be those people who give ourselves in mutual service to each other in the name of the one who did not think equality with God was a thing to be grasped but emptied himself for us in love. In fact, for us, Christ just is the one who reveals to us that God is self-giving love. To say Jesus is the incarnation of God is to say that God is self-giving love.

Paul is saying something that is radically counterintuitive. The love you desperately need and rightfully seek will not come to you when you set out to be loved but when you give yourselves in love. The need to feel like you matter, that you are not invisible, that you are treasured and beloved is a basic human and spiritual need. It is not to be dismissed or trivialized, but the answer to this need does not come to us when we set out to grasp it. Love comes to those who practice it. In the words of that great theologian, St. Paul McCartney,

"And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make." Here, of course, Sir Paul is really offering a rock and roll exegesis of St. Francis of Assisi prayer that we recite every week:

Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

In the end, I think both Pauls and Francis are offering us a surprising word. They say to us, Your woundedness is no reason to believe that you cannot love, that you have nothing to give to the world. You do not have to wait to be whole to give yourself in acts of care.

If we take in their lessons, we are reminded that we need not wait for the restoration of our neatly bounded selves before we act in love and service. Perhaps everything hinges on how we carry our wounds. The question we must ask ourselves is

this: Will we seek to soothe ourselves with balms that cannot heal, will we seek to evade and avoid the truth of our brokenness, or seek instead to be wounded healers to use Henri Nouwen's beautiful phrase? Will we find the courage to risk the work of kenosis and vulnerability even though the sting of our injuries remains severe. That is the most exigent of questions, the one that we must answer individually and for ourselves as a community.

The feminist theologian of trauma, Shelly Rambo, reminds us that even the resurrected body of Jesus the Christ bears the mark of his torture and brutal execution. In fact, it is by his scars that he is recognizable to his disciples. Surely it ranks among the deepest of mysteries of our faith that the resurrected body of one we call divine is not a perfect and unmarked body. What a strange faith is ours to confess—an executed criminal is Lord and God bears for all eternity a scarred and open body. Remember that the resurrected body of the Christ is not just scarred; it is open. Thomas, the one who doubts, Thomas who stands in for us, is invited to insert his hand into the always eternally open body of God: “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (John 20: 27).

The open and unbounded body of Jesus reminds us that we risk waiting for far too long if we wait for our wounds to close. That glorious body reminds us that our wounds need not cripple us but can instead become a site of opening and of deep identification with the world's pain and need. That we are not whole, that we have been rendered permeable to the world by the assaults we have suffered, might mysteriously make it possible for us to have the same mind among us that was also in Christ Jesus.

This does not mean that we can disregard the work of healing or that we ought to give ourselves over in submission to those who abuse us. There is an absolute difference between the call to give ourselves in love and keeping ourselves in a masochistic posture of submission to those who wound us and wound themselves in their violence. There may be times when in seeking to live out love in non-violent resistance, we are called to stand before water hoses and bulldogs but the capacity for such radical love is not acquired overnight nor is it a capacity that is gained without contemplative discipline. Love in such extraordinary measures must be given to us in the course of our own healing.

But we who are the body of God made social would also do well to remember that we need not wait for our church bodies to be wound free before we can do the work that God has called us to accomplish. I know of no perfect churches. Do you? So, let us then pray to God for the courage and grace to embrace the kenotic life of self-giving love and let us pray that God's grace will transform our many wounds so that they may no longer bind us in servitude but become instead by God's healing grace a source of healing for others.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love.