

Love and Suffering

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

This term in one of my philosophy courses we discussed what David Holley calls “life-orienting beliefs”.¹ These are existential beliefs that help you make sense of your life. They are answers to questions such as: Who am I? What am I here for? What is my purpose in life? Which practices are worthy of my time and commitments? How should I deal with suffering? I’ve been revisiting these questions a lot in the last year, probably due to the radical changes in our government and uncertainty about the topsy turvy world we’re all living in right now.

Maybe you’ve been feeling tossed around too; maybe you too have felt uneasy and unsure about what to be giving your time and energies to. It’s a good time for us all to reflect on what we’re here for. So, what *are* we here for? What are *you* here for? If you were asked to state in one sentence what you’re here for, what would your answer be? More telling, I think, would be the story that your *actions* tell. I think if someone were to study my life, not by considering what I *say* about my life but rather by looking at my *actions*, I think they’d conclude that up to now I’ve thought that what I’m here for is to achieve things I’m interested in that are likely to bring me praise, respect, and acclaim.

But, as I’ve pondered those life-orienting questions in recent months, I’ve had an epiphany. I’ve realized that that’s not what I’m here for. Here’s the new thing I think I’ve discovered: I’m here to learn how to love. That’s it. That’s my purpose, here on Earth: to learn how to love. For weeks now I’ve been saying it like a mantra to myself and I’ve been amazed at the results. I’m here to learn how to love.

I’m not sure how I’ve missed this crucial insight until now. I’ve heard it all my life, but I haven’t lived as if it’s true. Think about all the things that people

¹ Holley, David M., *Meaning and Mystery: What it Means to Believe in God* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

live for. Some people make it their life's work to get rich, or to have a highly respected job, or to command or govern other people, or to be famous, or to get people to behave the same way they do. But none of that is what the scriptures tell us we're here for. They tell us that we're here to learn how to love. Jesus says that all the law and the prophets can be summed up with: love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.² St. Paul says that you can have all the good things but if you lack love you're nothing.³ And Jesus tells us that people will know that we are his followers by our love for one another,⁴ for love is of God and everyone who loves, loves God.⁵ It's just love, love, love.

I suppose I shouldn't be too hard on myself. Looking back on my life, I can see progress in learning to love. I've extended my circle of welcome to marginalized people and I have a more inclusive, less judgmental sense of God's kingdom. The best instruction has come from my family. My children have drawn me out of myself and trained me to care about others. My wife Sigrid, especially since her brain cancer and surgery, has been a lesson in learning how to love, a lesson I feel like I'm just beginning.

So, I've made some progress. The challenge for me has been to see these lessons in learning how to love as the *point* of my life, as what I'm here for. For much of my life they've been secondary to what I've apparently thought I was primarily here for: to make my mark on the world, to accomplish something big or at least noticeable, to gain the respect that others would give me for my accomplishments.

My new insight that I'm really, truly here to learn how to love has literally changed my entire outlook and focus in life. It hasn't persuaded me to drastically change the projects I'm doing or anticipating, but it has radically altered how I'm thinking about them and how I'm engaging in them.

² See *Matthew* 22:37-40, *Mark* 12:28-31, and *Luke* 10:25-28, where Jesus is referring in part to part of the Jewish *Shema* in *Deuteronomy* 6:5.

³ Or you're just a clanging cymbal. See *I Corinthians* 13:1-3.

⁴ See *John* 13:34-35.

⁵ See *I John* 4:7-8.

When you really let it sink in that you're here to learn how to love, it will change you. You might feel called to alter your life plans or commitments, or you might not. But, whatever you're called to do, your knowledge that you're here to learn how to love will color everything you do: you'll judge the quality of your work by how your work is teaching you how to love. You'll no longer see the value of your work as depending on whether you make your mark on the world, or on whether you accomplish something grand, or on whether you get recognition and respect from others. Those things might come your way, and they might not. But, those aren't the *reasons* you're doing the work. You're doing the work in the interest of learning how to love.

Of course there are many different ways to learn how to love, and many different things to learn how to love. I'm not here to tell you what that looks like for you. Each of us must search our own heart for that.

But, I do want to say something to all of you, and to myself as well. Learning how to love will cause you to *suffer*. When you love, in the self-giving way that Jesus talked about (*agape* love), that love is going to cause you to suffer. People who need our love are not magically fixed once and for all by any way we love them. We cannot ultimately fix them by loving them. And we know this. So, our loving does not cease suffering. Indeed, to love deeply requires us to enter into the other person's orbit, to sympathetically or empathetically feel with them. I don't think there's any other way to do it. Love requires suffering.

This does not strike most people as happy news. We don't like it. Our natural tendency is to respond to suffering by diverting it with short-term pleasures, or by repressing the traumas that trouble us, or by seeking to stop suffering altogether. In fact, some philosophies teach that suffering is the source of all our problems; so, if you detach yourself from all the passions you'll no longer suffer; and I suppose that's true.

But, as people who follow Jesus, we are not called to avoid suffering or to detach from it. We are called to enter into it. I'm not kidding. Take our Gospel

reading for today.⁶ Jesus goes down to Bethany, knowing that Lazarus is dead and knowing the suffering he'll see in the faces and bodies of those who loved him. "When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died". When Jesus saw her weeping..., he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.... Jesus began to weep. So the [people] said, "See how he loved him!"⁷

Note that Jesus does not respond dispassionately to these people he loves. There is no stoic equanimity here. Jesus was not serene, composed, impassive. He was so disturbed in spirit that he *wept*. Consequently, the people said, "See how he loved him!" Notice the connection between Jesus's own suffering and his love.

We see the same pattern in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus is deeply troubled in spirit, as he wrestles with the decision he faces about whether to suffer and to die.⁸ It is out of love for God and humanity that Jesus decides to enter into the ultimate suffering.

We are called to follow Jesus, and so we are called to love, and thus we are called to suffer. It's not that suffering is good for its own sake. Suffering is what philosophers call an instrumental good. It makes other great goods possible. In our situation, here on Earth, in our context, suffering makes great self-giving love possible.

What will your suffering for love *cost* you? Let's be honest: it will cost you. For some, it will cost you friends who won't understand. It may cost you acclaim or fame you could have had if you had designed your life just for your own glory. It may cost you a respected place in the community. It may cost you time you could have used to develop skills that would move you up the social ladder. It will *definitely* cost you a lot of personal convenience. It could cost you your job. It might, as it has for many such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Alex Pretti, cost you your life.

⁶ *John* 11:1-45.

⁷ *John* 11:32-36.

⁸ See *Matthew* 26:36-46, *Mark* 14:32-52, and *Luke* 22:39-53.

This is why Jesus told his disciples to count the cost of following him. The call to suffering love is a call we'd prefer to avoid. I have my hopes and dreams; I want to accomplish them; I want to be known for my accomplishments; I want the respect of people I admire. But to get all this I have to prioritize myself. I have to make achieving my personal goals take priority over other things and other people.

How can we realistically give up our desire for recognition, respect, or adulation? How can you realistically give up making the achievement of your own personal goals the priority in your life? Learning to love is going to cost you; it will cost you time, maybe a promotion, or a job or an award or your safety or maybe your life. How does it *make sense* to give up these things for the sake of learning how to love?

I think the answer is in today's lectionary readings. And, this is what I really want to talk about today—the point of my homily. Each of today's readings is about our redemption by God. In *Romans* Paul urges us to set our minds on the Spirit, which is life and peace, rather than on the flesh, which is death.⁹ As I read this, the “flesh” refers to our ordinary selfish ways of living in the world, where the focus is on me and my desires alone. But to set the mind on the Spirit is to set the mind on love as the goal of life. The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God and indeed does not submit to God's will, for it is ruled by selfishness, pride, and fear of missing out. “But you are not in the flesh”, Paul says; “you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you... If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”¹⁰

This is extremely good news if we have the ears to hear it. Paul is telling us that our ultimate good is not secured by our achieving our personal goals for

⁹ See *Romans* 8:6-11.

¹⁰ *Romans* 8:9-11.

the sake of respect or recognition, but rather that our ultimate good is in our connection to God, who is love, and, by extension, in our loving all of God's creation. This news frees us from the burden of judging ourselves by how much we're recognized for our achievements. It allows us to think of our achievements in terms of how much we've learned to love through them. When this message really sinks in, the question will not be: did I reach my goal in a way that brought me attention, respect, or glory? But rather did I learn to love better by engaging in that project?

This sounds pretty good but note that it's in a context in which we're getting stuff done and things are going rather well for us. But the more we learn to love, the deeper our compassion for those who suffer will be. The more we learn to love the more we'll desire to help the disadvantaged, to right injustices, to protect the marginalized, to oppose the oppressors. These projects can put us at great personal risk. They can put at risk our reputations, our bank accounts, our jobs, and even our lives.

So here's the question: If learning how to love will cost me personally in ways that require me to suffer, *why* should I do it? *How* can I do it? If I submit to the laws of love, if I fully commit to learning how to love, it could end up costing me *everything*.

Hear what Jesus said to Martha in the midst of great suffering: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"¹¹

Do you *believe* this?, Jesus asked Martha. Well, how about you? Do *you* believe this? If you believe this, then you believe that your ultimate good does not depend on your personal safety and security here and now. Your life is hidden with Christ in God;¹² so even if you give up your life for love, you will live. Bodily death is not an ultimate evil. Our ultimate good is to live a

¹¹ *John* 11:25-26.

¹² See *Colossians* 3:3.

flourishing life in love with God and all creation. That life does *not* depend on how safe and secure our earthly life is. That life does *not* depend on whether we're recognized or respected for our achievements. It depends, rather, on how well we've learned how to love.

So, here's what I think I'm learning: if we can believe that Christ is the resurrection and the life, if we can believe that death really is not the end but that our destiny is lasting life in love with God and God's creation, then we can have the courage to see the goal of our lives as learning how to love.¹³

¹³ My references to what we can *believe* here are perhaps better taken to be a matter of *trusting*.