

The Risks of Love
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Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: "Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" ("Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?") "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! Jeremiah 8:18-9:2

A couple of weeks ago, I took a call to the SPC office, one of those calls that starts out real friendly-like, but you can just feel something coming. "I'm calling about that flag," the caller said. "The one on the church. Why is it there?" "We put it up during Pride Month." I said. "It's a *visible* statement of our welcome, a symbol of our embrace of diversity in general, and the LGBT community in particular; its a ministry we've been involved in for years." "What does *that* mean? Ministry?" she demanded. "Well," I said "active and visible inclusion and *celebration* of **all** of the diverse people in our congregation, our community, our world."

Then I mentioned weddings, and her niceness wore through completely. "Gay weddings?" She shouted. "Well, not exactly," I said. "Two men, two women, two people who love and commit to each other, and want to declare it publicly before God and their community--you know: just weddings. We love them."

And then, it was *on*. Truth, Holy Word, God's Unchanging Law. Men and women and Genesis. I assured her again and again that good faithful Christian people can *and do* understand all of those things very differently from her. Genesis 1, I said, was never a human sexuality text; it is a poem, a hymn of praise to the goodness of *all creation*. A celebration of day and night and everything in between. Of creatures and features and all humans, men and women and everything in between. I'm not sure what she heard, though; every time I spoke, she shouted over me.

At one point she informed me, "I know how this happened; it was that Randy Tremba." "Really?" I said. "You do know he's been gone for several years; he had nothing to do with the flag." "Well. He was the worst thing that ever happened to that church." she claimed. "Really?" I said, "the church is flourishing—it is now and it was then." "So is evil," she snapped.

And so help me, Teresa of Avila sprang immediately to my mind, that great spiritual pioneer whose experiences of God freaked out the church authorities so much they sent the Spanish Inquisition after her, again and again. This no doubt prompted her famous observation, "I do not fear Satan half so much as I fear those who fear him."

The conversation continued downhill from there, until finally she demanded: "Take that flag down! This is over!" and hung up.

I wish I could say I felt good about that call. I mean--I did work really hard to be calm and clear; I didn't raise my voice no matter how loudly she shouted at me. I don't think I said anything untruthful or unkind; I did stand firm. And, I do trust the seeds of the Spirit, I hold out a glimmer of hope that maybe something got planted in her heart. Maybe the next time she sees

that flag, something will remind her that maybe there are different ways of loving God and the world.

But, still I feel so ill equipped for that kind of confrontation. And, in the end, I mostly just felt sad. I felt sad for her; I told her so. I feel sad for whatever church is teaching this kind of ugliness, “in the name of Jesus”. And sad for all the gay and lesbian people *we know* are in her life, her family, and that church.

I feel achingly sad whenever I think of all the vulnerable LGBTQ kids out there still being deformed and sometimes destroyed in the name of God. Our friend, the *Rev* Jess Cook says that since their ordination they get tons of questions, especially from youth—the straight kids want to know: is OK to cuss? The LGBT kids want to know: am I going to hell? A recent study quantified the devastating cost of toxic theology; for straight kids, religious affiliation *reduces* suicidal tendencies, for gay youth, it has the reverse effect; the stronger the religious identification among lesbian and gay children the *higher* the incidence of suicidal ideation. Toxic theology can kill. I’ve worked with many LGBTQ youth, and I cannot think of a single one who hasn’t had some kind of destructive encounter with homophobic Christianity.

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick... Why have (the people) provoked me with their ...foreign idols?

This summer I read *Stamped from the Beginning*, a profoundly important book by historian Ibram Kendi. As its subtitle claims, it is the *definitive history of racist ideas in America*. Kendi argues persuasively that racist policies and practices give rise to racist ideas, not the reverse. And, from the very earliest days it was white Christian theologians and preachers who were the most influential producers of “biblically based” racist justifications for colonialism, slavery and genocide.

The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are (still!) not saved

Of course, homophobia and racism are just two manifestations of bad theology. Many of us were raised on an angry, judging god, who still inspires fear and despair. Then there’s puppet-master god, who always turns up when tragedy strikes; you know the one who saves people from burning buildings, *praise god...* which of course also implies that **he** fails to save all those who perished. Prosperity god rewards believers with all manner of worldly goods and material happiness, in exchange for right beliefs: *what would Jesus buy?* I grew up on clockmaker god, that benign but infinitely remote figure, who set it all in motion and then went out for a *really* long walk; that god was omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, and impassable-- unfeeling.

How can any of this relate to the God of justice and mercy that we encounter in the Hebrew prophets, the God of Jesus, the God of love? How has a spiritual tradition so deeply grounded in holy passion and compassion gotten so badly distorted? And how can we, as a spiritual community rooted in this tradition, work to counter toxic theology in tangible and visible ways? How can we bring some healing and restoration to all that has been defiled in the name of God? Jeremiah was asking some of the same questions, some 3,000 years ago.

Our own John Calvin observed that the human heart is an idol factory, endlessly creating lesser gods for us to serve. In our world today, the worship of wealth, power and privilege, the idolatry of whiteness and straightness—are all on full and hideous display. As flag lady reminded me, the god of rightness and rules is alive and well stirring up fear and division. But don’t we all dabble in our idols ... it’s a pretty human thing. So, its worth pondering, deeply and often: where do I place my trust; to whom or what am I giving my heart? Power, control, perfection, niceness, comfort? As Jesus cautions in today’s gospel lesson: you just cannot serve

two masters.

But the Book of Jeremiah is way more than just a rant about idolatry, at least according to the Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. In his seminal study *The Prophets*, Heschel suggests that Jeremiah's story actually invites us into the subjective experience of a human in such profound relationship with the Divine that he actually experiences a significant portion of God's own sorrow.

For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

In sharing God's sorrow, Jeremiah wrestles with both overwhelming grief and an awful lot of anger. (Seriously? Jeremiah is kind of a mess.) But somehow, he also manages to intuit a powerful glimmer of hope, expressed in his vision of God's *new covenant*, found not in lists and law, but written right on human hearts. Every human heart. That means *all* of us are invited into solidarity with the God of love, into *participation* in God's own delight and joy, as well as God's infinite sadness at all that has been defiled, and desire for the healing of all things.

I can't explain what sharing God's sorrow means, exactly, but I know its real. We see it in Jeremiah, we see it in Jesus. We see it in the lives of the mystics, especially the women; the most famous image we have of Teresa, inspired by the words of her autobiography, is the Bernini sculpture of her being pierced in the heart by the sword of God's love. Shortly before he died, I heard spiritual teacher Jerry May talk at length about his increasing encounters with holy sorrow in his ministry as a spiritual director. He called it a new / old idea, that if God is love, then God must surely be vulnerable. *That God needs us, that God calls us into relationship, which can and does invite our participation in holy grief.*

I, too, have seen this at work in ordinary lives, this sense of heartbreak so profound and yet so clearly not quite fully one's own. It can be scary and even paralyzing, *and* it can also be powerfully motivating. I believe that when we can learn to share our sorrow with God, even as we receive some measure of God's own grief, this exchange can actually help insulate us against despair. When we can learn to live holy sadness as a form of prayer and ponder it as an invitation, it can help move us toward what Jewish tradition calls *tikkun olam*, the mending of that one broken part of the world that is ours alone to mend.

Parker Palmer points out that ours is a time of particular heartbreak; in such a time as ours, how can God's heart be unmoved? Palmer cautions, however, that there two ways the heart can be broken. It can be shattered into shards of unresolved suffering that we then inflict on others, or, our hearts can be broken open into "largeness of life, a greater capacity to hold one's own and the world's pain AND joy..." He concludes, "the holiest thing we have to offer the world is a broken open heart, emptied of fear and vengeance, filled with forgiveness and a *willingness to take the risks of love.*"

May this be so, for each of us and all of us together. Amen