

# **Moral Values**

*What I Learned  
Growing Up in Church*

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## **Moral Values: What I Learned Growing Up in Church**

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# Acknowledgments

Every writer owes many people deep gratitude. My story would not be what it is without far more people than I can name in these words of acknowledgment. This book is a reality because of countless other books I have read and probably thousands of people – pastors, teachers, friends, family, writers, and others – who have helped form my thoughts. But some need more explicit thanks.

My parents provided the home and took me to the churches where I grew up as a Christian and learned that love is the ultimate moral value. They taught me and reinforced the church's teachings of Jesus that the greatest of all commandments is to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

My family gave me ample opportunity to practice the ways of love in the most intimate of relationships, helping me see my faults, blindness, weaknesses, and sins as I often struggled to live with the love I encouraged in them.

Since 1999 Joy Bergfalk has walked with me on this journey of love as my wife and companion and has encouraged and challenged me, helping me deepen my experience and understanding of the ways of love.

My proposal to the church later in the book took shape at two training events with the STAR program (Seminars on Trauma Awareness and Recovery) conducted by the staff of the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Many of the peacebuilding concepts which form the foundation and structure of this proposal are adapted from what I learned there.

To all the people I have named and all who cannot be named here, thank you.

# Preface

What I know about moral values I learned growing up in Protestant churches and in a Christian home. We went to church on Sunday as a matter of choice, perhaps of habit. Whether out of choice or habit, we went both to Sunday School and to worship. And as a teen, I went to youth group and to choir. Some years it seemed we were at the church more evenings than not.

In high school I spoke with my pastor about a sense of call to the ministry. He wondered why I felt a call, and I responded that the church was so much a part of my experience I wanted to spend my life there. And he said that wasn't enough reason to prepare for ordained ministry. He was right. In succeeding years I did experience a deep sense of divine calling to give my life to God through the church and the pastoral ministry. For 35 years, that's

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what I have done. And I know now, more than ever, ordained ministry has been God's call in my life.

My personal library is filled with books I have read. My formal education led to a Doctor of Ministry from Princeton Theological Seminary. I study, read, and learn from others all the time to test what I think and believe. My library has a dozen Bibles which I've underlined and outlined over the years, as well as commentary sets and Bible study resources I've devoured as I seek to know and understand the scriptures. My heart and mind yearn for confidence that God is behind my convictions and moral commitments, that the Spirit guides my moral choices.

### **BASIC MORAL VALUES**

Given that experience of learning over 35 years as a minister, and changes here and there in how I live out my fundamental values as a Christian, the moral values I hold and the choices I make still come out of the core of what I learned as a child growing up in church and in a Christian home.

I learned early in life simple lessons like these:

- Be kind to others.
- Be patient.



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- Respect everyone.
- Forgive people who hurt you.
- Stand up to bullies without fighting.
- Be honest without hurting people.
- Let other people be who they are.
- Be faithful to your friends.
- Love God and other people.

These simple values form the concrete foundation for the life God calls me to live out in the church, as well as in the world. I am convinced that God calls the whole church to live by them as well. As I experience the church today, I see a large crack in the foundation.

### **AN INVITATION TO THE CHURCH**

This book is an invitation to the church in America to learn how to live together in love. By the end of it, you will read a simple proposal for how that might happen. I hope you'll stay with it to the end of the book even if you sometimes disagree with what I say because that's at the heart of the church's problem. People keep leaving the conversation because we disagree.

We need to continue loving conversation without expectation of final agreement. That is the meaning of dialogue. What we experience much more in the church is

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debate – presenting our arguments, challenging, seeking to persuade, all with the goal of winning the majority opinion, by vote if necessary. Where is the love in that approach to disagreement?

I wrote this book to initiate more conversation with people in the church about moral values. And I wrote it for the Christian church in all its diversity, for people whose core commitment of faith is solidly within the Christ-centered tradition of the church built upon a common understanding of scripture and faith experience. People outside that tradition may find the book helpful. Much that I say could be written in the broader context of other religions and moral philosophy. But I want to address the Christian church directly in these pages.

The church today is deeply divided over our understanding of moral values and their biblical roots. Some people define key moral values as abortion and homosexuality, and some say key moral values are larger than that, the values of life and love. Some see black-and-white values taught in scripture, and others see shades of gray in a biblical tradition with its roots embedded in writings spread out over 1,000 years.

The choice is not either/or but both/and. There are some clear black-and-white moral teachings in scripture (though not as many as some people think), and there

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are many shades of understanding of such concerns as marriage, family life, sexuality, religious life, the sanctity of all life, and the roles of men and women in society, to name just a few.

In a small book like this we cannot consider all the moral teachings of scripture. And this is not an academic study of any of them. It is a personal witness to my faith. I want to focus on the ultimate moral values of life and love, especially love. What does the Bible teach us about love, and what are the implications of love in our concern for those who have yet to be born and our concern for the sacredness of marriage – two areas of moral values argued so vociferously during the 2004 U.S. election?

Will the church survive its deep divisions? Will mainstream denominations in the U.S. find a way to continue to live together despite the seemingly insurmountable differences of understanding about what we believe to be of ultimate importance in our faith? Will the different branches of the church – sometimes characterized as conservative and liberal – be able to accept each other as members of the same spiritual body and family and learn to live together without rancor and with respect? These are the fervent questions in my heart and soul as I write this book.



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**T**he question of homosexuality rises like the continental divide, marking the place where the church now flows in opposite directions. Is it possible for the church to flow in the same direction, even as separate branches? If not, can we create channels so the different branches of the church can flow freely from their common source in the directions they are going?

As I write this, the Anglican Church division over the election of an openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, U.S.A. dominates the religious news. The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., the United Methodist Church, and the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. are all engaged in openly divisive procedures which threaten their future. The American church seems clearly, sometimes caustically, divided between those who are committed to

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traditional views of scripture and sexuality and those who are equally committed to emerging views of scripture and sexuality.

This question does not exist alone as the quicksand in which the church is mired. The question of abortion – or more appropriately, what it means to be “pro-life” – has divided the church for at least 30 years. Before that, and in some places to this day, the church has divided over the question of whether women have a place in ordained ministry. Before that, the question was about slavery. Off and on, the question has been about war or nonviolent resistance.

If we continue back through the course of history – all the way back to the first churches whose stories we learn in the New Testament – we find a multitude of questions which leaders of the church allowed, even encouraged, to create serious divisions in the church. When will it end? Or can it?

During the 2004 election in the United States, the phrase “moral values” became a public point of division. The language sounds religious, even Christian, yet there is nothing inherently religious or Christian in the notion of morality. It has to do with what is considered good or bad, right or wrong, by those who judge behavior. It has to do

with adhering to standards of what is good, right, and just, or what is bad, wrong, and unjust.

Who decides the standards? Who establishes the values which define morality? Whose voice speaks over the rest to give us any certainty in choosing moral behavior over immoral conduct?

### **WHAT DOES EVANGELICAL MEAN?**

I consider myself evangelical, in the best sense of that word. People define the term differently, of course. Some define it by a set of beliefs, especially concerning the authority of scripture and the nature of salvation. Some define it as having to do with a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Without disputing the importance of any of those criteria, I believe “evangelical” is about the good news, the evangel, the story of Jesus who revealed God to us and who defined by his life and teachings the nature of God’s love and God’s desire for the world.

“Evangelical,” however, has been used to divide the church, which is not good news at all. How can we be evangelical and divide the body of Christ into groups of Christians according to their beliefs and practices? If evangelical has any biblical roots at all, surely those roots grow deep into Jesus Christ, the head of the church which is his

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body, as the New Testament says. Its claim is that Jesus has made us one, creating a unity of the Spirit which is God's work. If we do anything to harm the body, to divide the church, we are wounding Christ.

### **WHEN THE BODY HURTS**

With that understanding of being evangelical, I participated in a clergy meeting last August which nearly robbed me of any hope for the church. At this national gathering, the question of whether gay and lesbian persons can be accepted as ordained ministers was forced to the top of our agenda. I felt a deep sadness as we considered the issue because the situation felt so much like going through a divorce or the loss of a child, both of which I have experienced. The sadness came out of the grief of losing something precious to me, something very much a part of my life and of who I have been. And I sensed that nothing we could do would keep the group together.

The biblical image of the church as a body, with each one of us a member of the same body, is especially apt for me right now. I'm in pain, one member of the body calling out to the rest of the body for help.

People who know me know I'm a klutz. I don't fall down the stairs, I fall up them. Just the other day, I was taking the dogs out for a moment with my house slippers



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on. As I turned to go up the stone steps, one shoe slipped off. In my reaction I lost my grip on one dog's leash and stumbled, and the other shoe came off. Then I slammed a big toe into the side of a step. The pain was sudden and demanding. My whole body hurt. That one small member of my body was crying out in pain, asking the whole body to help it stop hurting. I am that member of the body today.

At that clergy gathering, I almost lost hope that Christians who hold opposing views on questions such as homosexuality and abortion, to name two highly-divisive issues of 2004, could live together any longer in the same denomination. I had almost lost hope that denominations with strong commitments to “moral values” on one hand and to “justice and peace” on the other could live together in the same church. Some have even begun to speak of how we have two different religions.

Our hope is in God, however, and I will not give up on God or the church. More helpful for us than a review of church history – looking back at questions that have divided the church – would be another reading of scripture, especially in the New Testament, which describes the church with language we need to remember.

The church belongs to Jesus according to the New Testament; through the Spirit we are all one, whether we

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acknowledge it or not. Our unity is a God-given reality, not something we have created. Our unity is in God, not in doctrine, moral values, principles of faith, interpretation of the scriptures, or anything other than in the Spirit.

Christian unity is a matter of both heart and mind, joined in spirit through the Spirit of God. Our unity rests in mystery, in the reality of God and of Christ which is beyond our understanding. Our experience of spiritual unity flows out of living in God's love, for love is God's essential nature.

### **WHAT IS OUR COMMON GROUND?**

Scripture calls us to **keep the unity of the Spirit**, [*Ephesians 4:3*], declaring that the church is united through God's Spirit. How can we experience and strengthen the reality of this unity? Rather than allowing any question to create such a continental divide as we now experience – causing us to flow in opposite directions – can we ask whether we have a common source out of which we all flow? Does the church share common ground upon which we can stand together? In spite of the profound differences of understanding as we read the same scriptures, can we find in them firm ground for our hope and for a united life together?

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The earliest confession of Christian faith remains the one place to which we return after all our theological meanderings: Jesus is Lord! The church in all its variations has consistently agreed that Jesus' life and teachings form the bedrock of our common ground. The church has acknowledged that our theological beliefs and moral values rest securely on who Jesus was, what he said, and all that he did.

Some Christians use the question, "What would Jesus do?" (WWJD) almost as a mantra. Some even make it an accessory to their clothing. For most it is a serious question demanding serious answers. Their faith convictions about moral and practical questions of life come out of what they are convinced Jesus would do today.

Other Christians have claimed the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' own example as the point of critical examination for what they do. The gospels are often the lectionary texts from which they preach. Their conviction that Jesus' teaching and actions form the core values of Christian practice lead to the same question – what would Jesus do in this situation?

Our common ground is found in Jesus, especially in what Jesus said and how he lived and what the Spirit of Christ continues to teach us. The church's consistent conviction through the centuries remains the same today –

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that Jesus is Lord. That Jesus' life and words, and the Spirit of Christ, remain the foundation upon which we build our lives.

As a child growing up in church I learned the story and sang the song about the foolish man who built his house on the sand and the wise man who built his house upon the rock. When the rains came and the winds blew, the house on the sand was destroyed, but the house built on the rock stood firm. [*See Matthew 7:24-27*]

The wise ones, Jesus said, are those who **“hear these words of mine and put them into practice.”** The authority for our lives comes out of Jesus' words, reinforced by Jesus' attitude and behavior in his own life, and strengthened today by what we hear from the Spirit. Jesus is the one, for the Christian, who decides what behavior is moral or immoral. Jesus is the one who judges what is good or bad, right or wrong, correct or incorrect behavior.

### **WHAT DID JESUS SAY?**

Jesus never spoke directly about abortion and homosexuality. He did say a great deal about life and love. He taught repeatedly about care for the poor, the danger of wealth, the abuse of religion, and the way of com-

passion and mercy for the weak, the rejected, and the enemy.

So what does Jesus say and what would Jesus do? This question has always been the heart and soul of the Christian church. What Jesus said and did is our authority, the gospels are our primary source, and the Spirit of Jesus is our continuing guide in life.

Some people will object by saying that all scripture is our authority. I believe that as well. But the scriptures do not speak with a single voice about behavior and attitudes, about what is moral, about what is right and wrong.

Jesus goes beyond what the Hebrew scriptures said, and that was “the Bible” of Jesus’ day. At times Jesus even contradicted them in what we have called the Sermon on the Mount. Quoting from the Hebrew scriptures (the Christian Old Testament), Jesus said, **“You have heard that it was said....”** And then adds, **“But I say to you....”** [*See Matthew 5*]

In every example, Jesus moved beyond the traditional interpretation of the scriptures. He saw that the people had focused on outward forms of behavior and made that focus the most important thing while ignoring inward attitudes of heart and mind which Jesus said were more important.

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People knew that murder was wrong, but Jesus said not to be so angry that we would curse someone. He told us to go and be reconciled with someone we have offended before we go to worship God.

Jesus goes beyond outward rules of behavior (do not murder) to deal with relational concerns. What we say and how we say it are also important. God cares whether we have offended someone, and if we need to be reconciled with another person, at least as much as God cares about our worship.

People knew that adultery was wrong, but Jesus said not even to look with lust on another person. [He said a woman because he mostly spoke to men; but it applies to all, even though men commonly wrestle more with it than women.]

Jesus honored the covenant of marriage with strong words for people who commit adultery, but he went beyond what scripture said to emphasize emotional and mental faithfulness as well. When a man looks at women with lust, he wants to dominate and use them for his own satisfaction. That happens within marriage as well. Faithfulness to another person grows out of love for that person and cannot be contained only within legal and physical boundaries of marriage.

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People knew that breaking an oath was wrong, but Jesus said not to take an oath, not to swear, at all. Rather, simply be honest in all that we say.

Traditional interpretation of scripture has most often stayed in a narrow valley of understanding, focused on the outward limitations (do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not swear). Jesus takes us by the hand to lead us out onto a broad plain of understanding God's intentions by turning our attention to what is inside of us, our attitudes, motives, unspoken desires. God desires simple, honest relationships of love for one another.

People had been told to limit their revenge, to take only an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But Jesus said not to take revenge at all. Do not respond in kind to someone who is treating you violently or unjustly.

Scripture allowed limited revenge for injustice and violence done toward us – eye for eye and tooth for tooth. Many Jewish people of Jesus' day felt justified by the scripture to pray for revenge against their enemies, to seek it on their behalf, even to take it into their own hands. Unfortunately, the same interpretation of scripture leads many Christians today in the same direction.

Jesus said the scriptures were wrong. God's desire is for peaceful response, although directly confronting the abuser. Nonviolent resistance involves engaging "the

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enemy,” the unjust or violent perpetrator. Peacebuilders today often call it “the third way.” Rather than running away or passively accepting the abuse or injustice, and rather than fighting back with similar violence and injustice, we find a third way of loving our enemy in open challenge to their dominance and authority.

People had been told to love their neighbor, but were given permission to hate their enemies. Yet Jesus said, **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”** Follow the example of God, he added, who sends rain on all people, both evil and good at the same time. Go beyond loving only those who love us, for even the most despised of people will do that.

In the gospel of *Luke*, Jesus goes even further. **“Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.... If you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full.”** And then the clincher: **“Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back.”**

And why would we do this seemingly impossible thing? Because God **“is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.”** [*See Luke 6:27-36*] God is good to all people, not just those who love God. The kindness, mercy, for-



givenness, and love of God go out to everyone regardless of their moral character or level of faith. And we are called to live the same way.

Jesus directly contradicts a major theme of the Hebrew scriptures, saying that God does not seek revenge on “ungrateful and wicked” people. God does not withhold good gifts from people because they are not people of faith. God is kind, loving, and generous to all. The implications of Jesus’ teaching form the foundation of what this book claims as core moral values for Christians.

I grew up in churches and in a home where the Sermon on the Mount and all of Jesus’ teachings were foundational for life. When I began to preach in my early 20s, I read the scripture and interpreted it according to what Jesus said and did. When I read passages, especially in the Hebrew scriptures, which made me wonder about the moral values of the people in the story, I would ask, “What did Jesus teach? What did Jesus do?”

### **WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT?**

The question of my heart and mind has always been: “What did Jesus say was most important?” That question guides my interpretation of scripture. And in my reading of church history and doctrine, that has been the central question – if not always the only question – of the

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church. As Christians we take the name of Christ, of Jesus, saying in effect that the way of Jesus is our way, that the words and life of Jesus guide us in all our decisions.

What, then, is most important according to Jesus? Is there one thing, above all else, by which we make moral decisions and value judgments in this life? I am convinced the clear answer is “yes.”

The most important thing is love. Nothing is more important than the love of God and of one another. That’s what I learned growing up in church.

Matthew’s gospel tells the story this way. An expert in the Jewish law, with its more than 600 commandments and a multitude of interpretations, came to Jesus and asked, **“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”** I can see Jesus answering without hesitation because he lived his whole life this way :

**“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”** [*Matthew 22:34-40*]

I preached the same message 35 years ago that I preach today. If we love God and each other, we fulfill the other desires of God as well. All other laws and com-

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mandments of religion, if they come from God's will, are summed up in this one thing. After extensive reading, study, preaching, teaching, and testing it in life and in the church for three decades, I am convinced more than ever that this is true, that this is the central message of Jesus.

Jesus is not the only one who said it, however. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Rome: **[All the commandments] are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.** [*Romans 13:9-10*]

In *1 John*, we read these challenging words to the church: **Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love....If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us....God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him....Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.** [*See 1 John 4:7-21*]

Love as the all-encompassing moral value is the word of Jesus to us, the Word of God. This is the message of the New Testament, and I believe of the whole Bible. All things are determined by our willingness to love God and to love people. Our moral choices, our cultural and religious values, our individual decisions – all are to be

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formed by this one supreme rule: To love God and one another.

# LOVE: THE ULTIMATE MORAL VALUE

What is God's dream for this world? The Bible and Christian theology give no clear answer to that simple question, but there are glimpses. More than glimpses, perhaps. The Bible opens windows to see into the world as God desires it. If we know what God desires, if we know what God's dream is, wouldn't we give our lives to fulfill it? [The "dream of God," of course, is not a biblical term; but the idea is entirely biblical.]

Jesus' invitation is this: **"Seek first [God's] kingdom and [his] righteousness."** *[Matthew 6:33]* Seek the justice, the good works, the right ways, and the faithfulness of God. Seek the path of God, the ways of God, the

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reign of God. Seek God's presence, God's embrace, God's love. God's kingdom encompasses all of that.

Among other things, when we seek the kingdom, we seek to know and to live according to the values, the moral values, of the reign of God. The question of God's kingdom is what the world would be like if God were king, president, leader of the world, rather than those who are in charge. What are God's values? What are the characteristics of the moral vision of God's kingdom?

### **THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS *SHALOM***

The prophet Isaiah saw through a window and described a time when natural enemies would live together in peace, the time of *shalom*:

**The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;  
and a little child will lead them.**

**The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.**

**The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,  
and the young child put his hand into  
the viper's nest.**

**They will neither harm nor destroy on all  
my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge  
of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.**

*[Isaiah 11:6-9]*

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Some people see in these words only a description of what life will be like at the end of time, as perhaps a description of heaven itself or of the time some call the millennium. But this seems to me an open window for us to see into the dream of God. Is this not what God desires for the world? And if it is, is it possible for us to work together toward the time of *shalom* even in this present world? Is this not our call as Christians?

Paul's words to the Christians in Rome are at least an echo of Isaiah's vision: **Love does no harm.** [*Romans 13:10*] The key phrase "no harm" unlocks the window to this divine dream. And love unlocks the door to the place where "no harm" becomes our experience. God desires a world where creation cooperates as it did at the beginning, where violence is unknown, where *shalom* permeates all the world. God desires the world described by Isaiah and will bring it into perfect existence at the end of time.

At the end of the book of *Isaiah*, we see the same vision described by God's word through the prophet:

**Behold, I will create new heavens  
and a new earth.  
The former things will not be remembered,  
Nor will they come to mind.  
But be glad and rejoice forever  
in what I will create....  
The wolf and the lamb will feed together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,**

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**but dust will be the serpent's food.  
They will neither harm nor destroy on all  
my holy mountain, says the Lord.**

*[Isaiah 65:17-18,25]*

### **SEEKING THE KINGDOM**

Some people say that we must wait until the end of time for this dream to become real. But is God's desire for us only to wait, to do nothing, to let the world continue just as it is until the end? What does Jesus mean by seeking the kingdom? "Seeking" is an active word. Jesus invites us to actively participate in the dream of God, seeking to bring it about by what we can do.

**Seek peace, and pursue it**, the Psalmist said. *[Psalm 34:14]* That's an active pursuit, a full participation in a life which desires peace and does what it can to create it.

The account of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple in *2 Chronicles 7:14* includes words familiar to many Christians, especially those of us who spent many years in the revival tradition of the church: **If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.**

This invitation to confession and repentance in a time of national threat tumbles past the open window



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where we see God's dream. Stop at the window and climb in. Enter into the dream of God opening before us, and join the activity of *shalom* – humbling ourselves, praying, seeking God's presence, turning from our sinful ways.

The kingdom of God and the dream of God are the same thing. God desires a world where peace and love reign supreme, a world where natural enemies live together in peace, a world where the strong and the weak eat and play together. God desires a world where no one does harm to another, a world where violence is only a memory, where abuse can no longer be found, and where war is gone forever. God desires a world where people's words, thoughts, attitudes, and actions all emerge from love.

Active pursuit of the divine dream fills the pages of scripture. God calls Abraham to leave his family and home and enter into a strange, new land. God draws Moses from the security of his home to return to the dangers of Egypt, then urges the Hebrew people to leave Egypt to go to the mountain where Moses heard God's voice. God thrusts the shepherd boy into the world of kings and armies and nations. God pulls the prophets, one after another, out of their relatively comfortable jobs and homes into lives where they make many enemies and face humiliation, suffering, and death.

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Jesus sent the disciples out to do what he had done. I **“came to seek and to save what was lost,”** Jesus said. [*Luke 19:10*] And so he ate with tax collectors and “sinners.” He spent time with women and men who were denied an equal place in the society of their day. He touched the leper, the untouchable, and the unloved. He forgave the unforgivable. He gave himself into the power of those who he knew would kill him. He did all this to actively seek the kingdom of God in this world.

## **THE HEART OF JESUS**

One story in the gospels reveals the heart of Jesus, in distinct contrast to the heart of people who were blind to the values of God’s kingdom. [*See Luke 7:36-50*] Jesus accepted an invitation to dine at the home of one of the religious leaders in a certain town. The custom in that day was to sit on the floor with feet tucked under or behind them, “reclining at the table,” as it was called.

While they were eating, a woman came into the house and stood behind Jesus at his feet. Other people saw her as one “who lived a sinful life,” whatever that meant and whatever her reasons. If she was a prostitute, as many think, she may have been driven to that life through abuse or poverty.

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As she knelt behind Jesus, her eyes flooded with tears which fell onto his feet, and she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and used the perfume she had brought with her to anoint his feet.

The religious leader, a Pharisee, watched all of this happen, noticed that Jesus did not protest, and thought (perhaps with anger, contempt, and self-righteousness): **“If [Jesus] were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner.”** The implication is clear – that if Jesus knew what kind of person she was he would have been equally contemptuous and sent her away. He would have had nothing to do with her.

Jesus was a prophet, and Jesus allowed her to anoint him, perhaps even welcomed it. He went on to talk about forgiveness and love, suggesting that the Pharisee knew nothing about either one and that this woman had experienced both.

On another occasion, Jesus said to other religious leaders who had the same dismissive attitude toward people they characterized as sinners: **“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”** *[Matthew 21:31]*

Jesus did not explain that statement, but he did say to the religious leaders that their refusal to repent was the

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reason these other people were going in ahead of them. Like the woman at the dinner, these “tax collectors and ‘sinners’” had experienced forgiveness and love and were pouring out all they had for God. They trusted God as Jesus spoke of love and forgiveness and came freely, joyfully into God’s kingdom.

The religious leaders Jesus addressed, however, refused to repent. In their stubborn spiritual blindness, they thought they were right and moral and acceptable to God. They thought they had no need of forgiveness and were dismissive of love, so they could not even see their need to turn to God.

So far as we know from the text, the behavior of these religious leaders was morally impeccable according to the standards of the day. I am sure there must have been exceptions, but I accept the idea that the Pharisees were men whose outward behavior conformed to traditional boundaries of morality in areas of sexuality, family life, and religious duties, for instance. But they lacked love which was the foundation of morality in Jesus’ teaching.

One story typifies Jesus’ view of the Pharisees as a group when he called them hypocrites: **“You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cummin. But you have**

neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.” [Matthew 23:23]

## THE ONLY THING THAT COUNTS

If we neglect love, including justice, mercy, and faithfulness, we neglect the core value, the ultimate moral value of the kingdom of God. If we dismiss love as not all that important, we miss what Paul said was the only thing that matters, the only lasting reality.

**The only thing that counts**, Paul wrote to the church in Galatia, **is faith expressing itself through love.** [Galatians 5:6] He implied that faith which does not express itself through love does not count. He writes in this letter about freedom, strongly urging these Christians to stand firm in the freedom Christ has given them and not to let themselves come under the yoke of slavery. What was that slavery but a strict adherence to rules of behavior which could be obeyed without love of God or people?

Paul speaks of indulging the sinful nature, which most people understand to refer to various outward behaviors. But the behaviors came from self-centeredness. So for Paul, the opposite behaviors came from an other-centeredness: serving one another in love. He continues by saying clearly that the entire law is summed up in a single

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command: **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** [*Galatians 5:13-14*]

An attitude toward life dominated by a willing love for people is the most important thing. Such love will be demonstrated by various behaviors, but loving one another from the heart is of first importance. Heart-felt love is the supreme value.

Love is not abstract, but concrete. Tangible passion for doing good for those we love stirs our hearts, trembles in our spirits, and drives us to daily actions and words of love for God and for people around us. Our minds fill with thoughts of love. Our hearts surge with feelings of love. Our spirits soar with the freedom to love.

Such overwhelming love may be beyond our experience. Surely we do not all experience this degree of love every day and in every relationship. This kind of love comes from God as a grace of the Spirit.

Paul’s climax in this letter to the Galatians speaks of the fruit of the Spirit, of the visible result of the Spirit’s work in our hearts and souls.

The fruit, as I read the scripture, is **love**. All the other things are ways of expressing that love or what flow out of love when we allow it to be supreme: **joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.** [*Galatians 5:22-23*]

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These are all matters of relationship: to ourselves, to others, and to God. Certain behaviors are suggested by these things, such as being physically and verbally gentle with people. But the behaviors come out of the attitude of the loving heart which is gentle, peaceful, patient, kind, good, and faithful.

### **THE EXCELLENT WAY**

One of Paul's clearest statements on love comes in a letter addressed to a seriously divided church, perhaps as divided as the church in our own day. He admonishes them about those divisions throughout the letter, urging them to repent and turn away from their factions, schisms, divisions and to find their unity in Christ.

They are all members of one body, he says, and none of them can say they don't need the other members, any more than the foot can say it doesn't need the hand or the ear can say it doesn't need the eye. They all need each other. How desperately we need to hear the same message today! The words are so familiar to many of us that they have lost their power to challenge us and call us to repentance.

In the midst of that portion of the letter we stumble – almost literally so – over what Paul says about love. [*See 1 Corinthians 13*] “The most excellent way,” he

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calls it. Love is the way of life which takes precedence over every other way of living and being in relationship with people. Rather than allowing our preferences, doctrines, ideas, loyalties, or spiritual gifts to become more important, Paul urges us to give first place in our lives to love.

We could speak in languages we had never learned, Paul writes. We could speak for God with understanding of great mysteries. We could have a faith that could move mountains. We could give away everything to the poor or surrender our body in martyrdom. But if we do not have love, if we do not do these things out of love, with hearts and minds filled with love, they are all worthless.

What comes before love for us today? What seems more important, taking priority in determining how we live with people, or whether we live with them at all? Do we make truth or principles more important than love? Is our commitment to justice more essential than loving relationships? Have we allowed our fear of “losing the denomination” to take priority over seeking love in the relationships that make the denomination viable?

People have always had different ideas of what love is, what it looks like in actual practice. So Paul goes on to describe the kind of love he means, the practices of love in everyday life:

- Love is patient



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- Love is kind
- Love does not envy
- Love does not boast
- Love is not proud
- Love is not rude
- Love is not self-centered
- Love is not easily angered
- Love keeps no record of wrongs
- Love does not delight in evil
- Love rejoices with the truth
- Love always protects, trust, hopes
- Love perseveres and does not give up

I see a pattern in all of this. Love is first a matter of the heart. Love is an attitude toward ourselves, toward other people, toward God. Love comes from within. But it also has practical consequences in our behaviors. In our relationships, love will not allow us to be unkind in what we say, or rude in our conversations, or quick-tempered in our reactions. Love will not allow us just to walk away from people.

Love for ourselves allows us to be patient and kind, and not angry, with ourselves. We can stop keeping track of all the “wrongs” we have done to ourselves. We trust ourselves, hope in ourselves, and don’t give up on ourselves.

Love for other people looks the same way in our relationships with them – patience, kindness, trust, and

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hope. In current conversations in the church, tolerance is seen as a virtue by some and a vice by others. But if it means a willingness to let other people be who they are rather than who we want them to be, to hold different ideas than we hold, to live differently than we do, then tolerance is part of love. For love is not easily angered, not self-centered, not proud, not rude.

What about the love that “does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth?” Does tolerance look the other way? How can we tolerate “evil” behavior in the church? These questions surface regularly in conversations about homosexuality. Our response depends on our understanding of homosexuality as a moral concern, especially whether or not it is sinful or evil, a discussion I’ll come back to in the next chapter. For now, I agree that if tolerance simply excuses or even affirms what is false or evil, it is not love.

Love for God, similarly to love for ourselves and for others, follows the same pattern of relationship Paul describes. I have at times been quite impatient with God, even angered by God. I have been self-centered in the relationship, not giving my attention to God but keeping it on myself. I have not always trusted God or been hopeful; at times I have felt like giving up.

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Loving God is a matter of relationship, not of doctrine, a matter more of heart and soul than of mind. Mind does enter in, of course, for how can we love God with our whole being unless our minds love God as well? But I know too well how we can convince ourselves we love God because we believe or do “the right things” as Christians, while our hearts are closed off to God and our spirits are drifting far away from God’s presence.

At the conclusion of this part of his letter, Paul names three realities he believes are at the heart of this life God has given us: **Faith, hope, and love**. And then he says that **the greatest of these is love**. Why? Because only love is eternal.

Even faith and hope will cease when they have been fulfilled, when we are eternally in God’s presence and know as we have been known. Yet love will remain forever. Love is eternal. Love is the ultimate value in life, for it is the only thing that remains when all else is gone.

How can we continue to cut people out of our lives, push churches out of our denominations, end relationships with other people on the basis of any other value? Whatever moral values we have are subject to this ultimate value of love. And love perseveres and never fails, never gives up.

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One childhood memory stands out as I reflect on what I learned growing up in church and in a Christian home. I was about ten, and my sister was eleven. I was a runt, and she had an early growth spurt; so she stood a foot taller than I did. We had been arguing, although I don't remember over what. I certainly wasn't going to let her win. I suppose we had been regularly bickering back and forth over many things. Dad's way of correcting our behavior on that occasion was to have us open the Bible to 1 Corinthians 13 and write it out long-hand. I don't remember how many times, but enough that I never forgot it.

When I was 17 and had been asked to preach a sermon in church one Sunday evening, I turned to this chapter. My first opportunity to speak from the pulpit demanded that I preach on the most important thing in life. The *Living Letters* had just come out, and I spoke from that straightforward version which describes it so clearly. For instance, it says: "Love is not irritable." Ouch!

Through the years, I have never departed from this core conviction that the most important thing in life is love. Jesus taught it. Paul taught it. At the heart of all scripture, I am convinced, is that childhood verse we all learned: "For God so loved the world...." The love of

God for all creation is the reason we are called to love everyone. No exceptions.

## **A NEW COMMANDMENT**

Jesus gave a new commandment on the night before he died. He had clearly affirmed love for God and for neighbor as the two greatest commandments during his ministry. No commandment is greater than these, he said. [*Mark 12:31*] Then as he met with his closest disciples that night, after he took the role of the least of all servants and washed their feet, saying he had given them an example to follow, Jesus said to them:

**“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all [people] will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”** [*John 13:34-35*]

The command to love was not new, but the quality of that love was something new – **“As I have loved you.”** The earlier command to love our neighbor as ourselves, coming out of the Torah [*Leviticus 19:18*], is a challenge to most of us because how many of us truly love ourselves in a healthy, appropriate way? Now Jesus calls us to love one another in the same way that he loves us.

Jesus honored people as they were, even as he expected repentance in their hearts and lives. He did not

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condemn, though he did judge the attitudes of the heart. He welcomed people whose behaviors were condemned by religion and society, people who were outcasts in their communities, people who had admittedly done what was wrong. He ate with them in their homes and freely forgave them. He did not look down on them.

If Jesus spoke words that sound condemning toward anyone, it was to the religious leaders of the day -- and not because their outward behaviors were unacceptable in religious and cultural terms, but because they were spiritually blind and inwardly unloving. He judged their hearts. He called them to inward change. The behaviors Jesus described as most unacceptable to God were actions demonstrating pride, greed, self-righteousness, and unloving hearts.

Yet Jesus honored them all. He ate at the homes of the rich and powerful, just as he ate with those who had nothing. He invited everyone to follow him, to share in the life he offered. He turned no one away. And when some turned away from him because they would not give up their pride, riches, and honor, he was sad for them. But it was their choice, not his.

The new commandment Jesus gave us is to love one another in the same way he loved us: Honoring all people, accepting the unacceptable, touching the untouch-

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able, forgiving the unforgivable. Jesus loved us by giving himself away, even to death itself. He suffered rejection, ridicule, abuse of all kinds, and physical violence, to show the full extent of his love. He refused the place of honor, rejected the place of privilege and power the people offered him, even willingly took the role of the least of all servants in order to show his love. This is the love we are commanded to live by.

### **GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE**

If we had any doubts about the extent of God's love, Paul erases them in his letter to the church in Rome: **When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly....God demonstrates [his] own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us....When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to [him] through the death of [his] Son.** *[Romans 5:6-11]*

The Bible does not use the phrase "unconditional love," but this text seems clear that the love of God has no boundaries, no limits. It is unconditional. This is the grace of love. God showed that love for all the world while we were God's enemies. Remember what Jesus said: **"Love your enemies."** This is what God did – and continues to do. This is what Jesus did. God loved us and

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sent God's Son to give his life for us – before we had become good and moral, upright and acceptable, before we had repented and turned toward God, before we cried out for help – while we were yet enemies of God.

There is no one God does not love, no one beyond the reach of God's love. There is nothing we could ever do to make God stop loving us. We are called to love in the same way: **“Love one another as I have loved you.”**

Then Jesus pushes us a step further. This is how people will know you are my followers, he says, when they see you loving other people. I have read biblical commentaries which say that loving other Christians is all Jesus meant here. The “one another” we are to love includes only other people who also confess faith in Christ. And by implication, they suggest those are people “of like mind” with us in all matters of doctrine and practice. That becomes a very narrow group of people, if it is even possible, and not at all what Jesus meant.

God loves the whole world. God loves even the enemies of God. God sends rain on the evil as well as the good. God reconciled the world through Christ. God's will is that no one should perish. I would need to write a book much longer than this one to list and discuss all the scriptures which speak of God's unconditional and all-



inclusive love. Those are not in themselves specific biblical words, but the idea they convey is – that no one is outside the love of God.

## **LOVE AND TRUTH**

In one of many email groups I belong to, one man said, “I am tired of hearing about love; what we need to hear is the truth.” These words were spoken in the context of a discussion on whether the practice of homosexuality is sin or whether the church should be open to all people, including people of different sexual orientation. I understood this man to be saying that “the truth” would shut them out, and that we should not use “love” as an excuse for accepting them.

Jesus spoke of truth on many occasions, always as something we know experientially, from the heart and not the head. John’s gospel includes part of an ongoing conversation with the Jewish religious leaders opposed to Jesus, some of whom even claimed he was of the devil because of his claims. In the context of Jesus’ claims to be “the light of the world” and to give light to people living in darkness, Jesus said: **“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** [*John 8:31-32*]

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The continuing practice of what Jesus taught seems to be what Jesus means here. If we continue to do, to put into practice, what Jesus taught, then we are really his disciples. Then we know and experience the truth, and only then are we free.

What was Jesus' teaching? In this conversation in *John*, Jesus had just spoken of his intimate relationship with the Father, as he called God, and of how he always did what pleased God. What did Jesus do that always pleased God? What did Jesus teach, both in word and action?

Jesus clearly said the most important thing in life is to love God with all that we are and to love others in the same way Jesus has loved us. This is Jesus' teaching. We are to hold on to it, to grasp it, to cling to it, to hold it close to our hearts. We are to let love take root in our heart, growing within us, and bearing fruit in our lives – the fruit of the Spirit, including joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We are to accept the unacceptable, touch the untouchable, and forgive the unforgivable. No one is to be outside the reach of our love.

If we love in this way, Jesus says, we are his disciples, those who learn from him and follow his way of life. As we live in this way, we will know the truth.

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Truth and love are not opposites. Rather, truth flows from love because truth is of the heart. Truth is not about what we believe but how we live. Only as we love fully, as we are fully loved by God, can we know the truth. And when we know the truth through love, Jesus adds, that knowledge and experience of truth will set us free.

Love leads to freedom. We are not free without love. Doctrines do not set us free; they divide us from those who believe differently. Laws do not set us free; they bind us with rigid rules which no one fully keeps, and so they make us even more aware of our sinfulness without setting us free from it. Clearly-defined groups of people – defining who is “in” and who is “out” will never set us free; rather creating these groups breeds enmity, jealousy, hatred, violence, and leads to great harm to people. Only love leads us into truth and freedom.

### **THE WORKS OF LOVE**

Only the actions, the works, of love show the sincerity of the faith we proclaim. The book of *James*, in traditional versions, speaks of faith and works and says that faith without works is dead, that it is of no value. Many commentators have explored the interpretations of what James meant. I think he meant that the works of love, the actions and behaviors which come out of love

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for God and people, are what clearly demonstrate that our faith is of God.

James speaks of being faithful in our relationship with God. Being faithful in any relationship comes from love for the other person. He speaks of not showing favoritism, of not giving preference to the rich over the poor. That is a matter of love. He speaks of taking care of orphans and widows – the weak and powerless in any society – and says this is the very essence of religion. He speaks of taking care of the physical needs of the poor rather than just praying for them and sending them on their way. All of these are the actions, the works, of love for our neighbor. The works of love reinforce and demonstrate our faith in God and in Christ.

James continues with other examples of love. He mentions **the royal law** early in his letter – **to love your neighbor as yourself** – and says that if we are really keeping that law, we are doing what is right before God. He goes so far as to say that we are not in a right relationship with God unless our faith is demonstrated outwardly through these works of love. He includes in his examples being self-controlled in what we say to other people. He goes deeper and talks about bitterness and selfishness in our hearts. And by contrast he talks about

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loving peace, being considerate, showing compassion to other people.

The church experiences unity through loving one another from the heart and expressing that inward love through outward actions of compassion, grace, and generosity. James, perhaps the earliest of the New Testament books, reinforces what Jesus taught about this in summary fashion. We would do well to listen again to the message in our day.

Why is it so important that we live with such love in our lives? We love because we have been loved by God. Read the little book of *1 John*. God has lavished love on us. The very essence of God is love. We know what love is because Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. Everyone who loves knows God. God is love, and all love is of God.

For more than 30 years my preaching has been molded by these thoughts written at the close of that first century of the church, probably among the last words of the New Testament to be written down. The traditional author of this letter is the apostle John, one of the sons of thunder, who once wanted to call down fire from heaven on Jesus' enemies. If he wrote these words, he made a fascinating journey of transformation in those 60 years. He learned that love is supreme among the values of the kingdom.

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We hear the same challenge as in *James*: How can we say that we have love if we do not take care of people in need without setting conditions? For our love is proved by our actions. And he adds an additional challenge: **We cannot love God whom we have not seen if we do not love people whom we have seen.** These words challenge me as much as anyone.

I am not perfect in love; I continue to struggle with loving the person sitting next to me, standing in front of me, walking past me on the street. I find it no easier than others to love the person who shouts at me, who does not respect me, who wants to shut me out of the group because of my ideas, my beliefs, my ways of living.

## **FEAR AND LOVE**

Fear drives people to shut other people out. Fear drives us to define the groups we want to belong to in ways that keep other people out. Fear stirs up the need for feeling safe among people who share similar ideas, beliefs, experiences, commitments, and sometimes even outward similarities of social/economic class, racial/ethnic heritage, political loyalties, national pride, and other group characteristics with which we identify. Fear is the root of all hatred, abuse, violence, and even the all-too-common

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lack of respect and acceptance of people who are different from me.

Fear knows no boundaries of moral or theological distinction, whether we are conservative or liberal. Fear crosses over all the fences we erect to drive us farther away from “the others.” Fear casts a dark shadow over the ground between us, moving us still farther away because we are afraid we might fall into some pit if we try to cross that ground. Fear reflects a false light behind us, drawing us to a place where we think the light will be found, but where we are enclosed by cliffs imprisoning us in our fears.

I discovered as a teenager in the letter of *1 John* a simple, powerful statement which has stayed with me and guided my beliefs and actions in so many ways. It says that **perfect love drives out fear.** [*1 John 4:18*]

Many people think – and confidently announce – that love is too simplistic. Love resolves nothing. Love cannot contain violence and abuse. Love is too soft, too tolerant, too nebulous. Perhaps we all are tempted to think the same way. But when we do, we fall back into the fear that creates so many of the problems we face in our world, the fear that causes divisions, the fear that molds and casts into concrete the tightly-controlled groups which have nothing to do with each other, which loudly deride the

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other, and which too often resort to abuse and violence to “solve” the problem.

Ridicule, abuse, and violence never resolve a problem, never eliminate division. They only reinforce the enmity and bitterness that is there. They build the walls that divide us still higher. Fear drives us to these actions, and these actions drive us further into fear. Love is the answer, the only answer, to fear. Love, perfect love, drives out all fear, along with the bitterness, hatred, and violence it provokes.

Was Jesus too soft when he stood up to his enemies without abuse or violence? Was Jesus too soft when he refused to give in to fear and hatred? Was Jesus too soft when he counseled us to love even our enemies? Was Jesus too soft when he accepted suffering and death at the hands of his enemies? The answer of the church has always been “no.” A resounding no. A deafening no. Jesus was no wimp. He was not soft. Jesus taught a different way to live in a dangerous world.

Jesus transformed lives through love. Jesus began a transformation of the world which continues to this day through love. Jesus showed us the way of love, taught us to love by his words and his life, called us to seek first the way of love because it is the way of the kingdom of God. If there is any hope for the world – and for the church in



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all its divisions – that hope will be found by following the way of Jesus, the way of love.



**The Practices  
of Love**



# Compassion

Compassion is love that listens, that seeks to understand the other person. Compassion willingly stays with another person in his or her need, often helping the person find a way through difficulties to something better.

The ultimate moral value is love. The way of love is the way of God's kingdom, of God's dream for the world. But what does that love look like? How do we live out the way of love in practice? Critics of love as the ultimate value claim that love does not work, that love does not produce moral behavior or stop abuse and violence. Are there ways of living out God's love in our lives which can accomplish that?

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### **A COMPASSIONATE GOD**

The practices of compassion, grace, and generosity best describe the ways of love, and compassion is the heart of love because it is the heart of God

God as revealed in scripture understood through Jesus' life and words is a God of compassion. God listens to those who cry out for help. God understands the suffering of people in need because God suffers with us and revealed that willingness to suffer with us most clearly in Jesus. God is patient, kind, gentle, merciful, caring, and supportive. God comes alongside us to help in our times of great need. Indeed God is always with us and is closer to us than we are to ourselves, for we live and move and have our being in God who is life itself.

Christian faith is relational. We are called by God to live in loving relationship with God and with each other, with ourselves and even with creation (the way of *shalom*). God's way of being in relationship with us determines our way of being in relationship with God and with all people. So what is God like? What are the characteristics of God's ways of relationship?

Compassion claims a top spot in defining divine characteristics of relationship. Early in the biblical narrative, Moses says to God, **“Now show me your glory.”** [See *Exodus 33, 34*] And the Lord stood there with Moses,

calling out God's own name, defining the essence of the divine character: **The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.**

This proclamation emphasizes love and forgiveness, but it also proclaims punishment for the guilty. Yet when this refrain of God's compassion, mercy, and faithfulness is sung in the Psalms and the Prophets, the last part about punishment is no longer there, as in *Psalms 86:15*: **You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.**

Jesus renews the song in the Gospels with this theme of God's compassion, mercy, and faithfulness.

**Be compassionate [merciful] as your Father is compassionate.** [*Luke 6:36*]

**Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.** [*See Matthew 5:43-48*]

And Paul lifts up the melody yet again, blending in beautiful harmony with the rest, when he says:

**Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave**

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**you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. [Ephesians 4:32—5:2]**

The Gospels tell story after story of the compassion of Jesus. The stories do not need to be retold here, but remember how Jesus touched the leper whom no one else would touch; how Jesus spoke gently to the woman caught in the act of adultery, brought without the man and alone before her accusers, and said, “Neither do I condemn you;” how Jesus held the children whom the disciples would have turned away; how Jesus ate in the homes of people called “sinners” by self-righteous citizens of the towns.

### **THE COMPASSIONATE FATHER**

One story has become for me a narrative backdrop against which I remember my own story. Jesus tells the story of a father with two sons. [See *Luke 15*] The story is more about the father than the sons, about a compassionate father who gave the younger son what he asked for, knowing that it might be wasted, knowing that the early dividing of the inheritance was not according to the rules. In this story we encounter a father who compassionately welcomes his son home after the son squandered every-



thing and brought shame on the family name by his behavior.

Perhaps the story is more about the older son than the younger, the son who stayed home and worked hard and remained respected in that town. The father compassionately went out from the party celebrating the younger son's return to remind the angry older son that everything the father had was his and that there was love enough for both sons.

### **THE OLDER SON**

I am the older son in the story. The older son was loyal, dutiful, moral, religiously observant, but without any depth of feeling for others. He was anxious, angry, and unforgiving toward this brother who dared to come home after all he had done. I am the older son who knew what was wrong and right, who observed the religious morals of the day, who did all he was supposed to do, and who expected to be the honored son.

At least I was that older son for the first 50 years of my life. I did what was expected of me, stayed within the moral and religious boundaries set for me, and exhorted others to do the same. And when people broke the rules, and lived outside the boundaries, I knew they were

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wrong and that they should suffer the consequences and answer to God.

I was not a sinner. I was among the righteous. Or so I thought in my heart. I tithed, I went to church, I kept the rules. And now this brother of mine comes back and my father welcomes him with laughter and food and gifts and celebration? What about me? What do I get for all I have done? Where is the celebration of my life, my faithfulness, my loyalty, my hard work?

I know his heart, for his heart and mind were mine. I was confident of my own righteousness, confident that my beliefs and values were right, for I agreed with the mainstream tradition which had always taught these things. I was confident that I knew right from wrong, and my “brother” was wrong.

I lived in the religious community of the older brother. We have to live by principles, we said. We have the scriptures, and they are clear that what my brother did was wrong. If we don't live by the rule of law, we will have anarchy in our religion and in the society. Or so we said. Principles and law were more important than people.

If people broke the rules, they were to be condemned. If they acknowledged that what they did was wrong, they could come back but would have to prove themselves before they could be fully accepted and trusted

again. If they had a different idea of what was right and wrong, and refused to acknowledge they had done wrong, the door remained closed. There would be no welcome home, no party, no celebration. They were still lost. This was the community of the older brother. It was my community for a long time.

### **WHEN MY LIFE CHANGED**

Then my life changed. Our 20-year-old son died in a car accident, and my wife and I divorced after several years of the relationship coming apart. How can I speak of these things only with stark words on a page? I felt that my life, as it had been and as I had hoped it would be, had come to an end. The darkness of sadness and grief felt like death to me, like a sudden dying and a slow coming back to life.

I came to understand what Paul said about his own experience: **I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.** [*Colossians 2:20*]

Before all that happened, I remember saying to someone, many times, that I could do whatever I decided to do. I spoke not as a rebel or lawbreaker, but in an overly-confident and arrogant way. As a child I learned

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self-control and was so good at it as a young adult that others considered me rigid and controlling. My choices grew from a root of fear of being embarrassed if I did not maintain control of myself and my circumstances. But my circumstances, of course, included other people, whether my wife, my children, or the members of the congregations I served as pastor. To others my decisions to do whatever I thought best felt dominating.

I persevered in my belief that life could be controlled. For years I failed to realize that controlling life's circumstances meant molding other people into my image of what they should be. If it were not so tragic, it would be laughable that I thought I could decide what other people should be and how they should live. Yet that is the world of the older son in Jesus' parable.

## **OLDER SON COMMUNITIES**

The older son community believes life can be controlled and that we know best how to do it. We are confident in our understanding of moral values, of what behaviors and beliefs are correct and right in the eyes of God. Religiously, our confidence comes from how we read the scriptures of our religion and how we understand our tradition. (Every religion has its own older son community.)

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The leaders of religious communities often come from this older son tradition and so their confidence also grows out of their place of authority and power in the organized religious community. In most cultures, including traditional Christian cultures of the western world and the United States, this authority and power interweave with the male-dominated social and family communities as well. Men have been in charge at home, at work, and at church.

That kind of confidence, rooted in positions of authority granted by the religious tradition, too often becomes arrogant and proud, sometimes even abusive toward people who disagree or are on the fringes of those communities. This is where the older son tradition often leads us. I know because I was there.

Older sons often preach compassion as an essential moral value, but the practices of the community often deny its primacy. For example:

- Compassionate conservatism which makes principles more important than people and sacrifices respect for individuals to maintain the principle
- Preaching that proclaims the love of God for all people, then says that if we don't accept certain beliefs God will send us to hell

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- Insisting that the way I interpret certain texts of scripture is the absolute truth and that anyone who disagrees denies the truth and is opposed to God's will, insisting at the same time that "I love the sinner and hate the sin"

Even though I never went to an extreme, I know I was part of a larger community which often did. My journey of the past decade has moved me out of that older son community, but the inner tendencies still surface.

## **A LIBERAL EVANGELICAL**

The mind of the older son can be seen both in people characterized as "liberal" and in people characterized as "conservative." No one theological position holds a monopoly on the older brother mindset.

I no longer call myself conservative; maybe I never was. Most conservative Christians would now characterize me as liberal, but categories don't reflect reality well.

I am evangelical, as I mentioned before, because I believe in the good news of the kingdom. I believe in the authority of the scriptures for my life. I believe in a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ and in eternal life given by God's grace through Christ. But I am also liberal.

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If “liberal” means to be generous and open-hearted toward people and toward God, I claim the title. If being liberal means to commit myself to God’s love as the ultimate moral value, then I accept it. If being liberal means to put people before the principles I believe to be correct, then that’s what I am. If being liberal means to believe that God really does love the whole world and that Jesus came to save and heal the world rather than to judge and condemn it, then I am liberal.

If “liberal” means to believe that God’s essential nature is love and that love is seen most clearly in the compassion, mercy, and forgiveness of God, I gladly accept such a name. God clearly revealed the divine nature in the stories of scripture – to Moses, through the prophets, in Jesus – as compassionate at the core, at the heart of God. So if labels were helpful, I might call myself an evangelical liberal or a liberal evangelical.

### **BORN AGAIN IN LOVE**

Let’s go back to what Paul said in *Colossians 2:20*: **I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**

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In my experience, to be crucified with Christ meant to die as the person that I was and to be born again as a person learning to be like God, not arrogantly taking God's place but humbly following the ways of God as I understand them. I no longer say that I can do whatever I decide to do. I learned the hard way that such arrogance is not of God.

My son, Phil, died alone in his car one dark night along the road. He was coming home from college for Christmas and driving too late with too little sleep. On a section of road under construction, he hit the side and over-corrected and drove off the other side, slamming into a tree. I wasn't there to hold him as he died, alone in the darkness. I didn't know it happened until the next afternoon. I couldn't have stopped it if I had known.

My wife and I did all we could do, in our humanity and our weakness, to keep together our marriage of nearly 30 years. We talked and talked. We went to counselors. We tried, but we failed. We let go of something that seemed to be killing us. I learned the hard way that I could not save our son's life or our marriage.

The rigid, controlling, arrogant man I was died. That dead man lived in the darkness of the tomb of grief, of sadness, of anger, of despair, for a long time. It felt like a tomb. I felt alone, cold, numb. But looking back,



perhaps it was really a womb. I was being born again. Birth itself follows a long process of formation and growth, learning to feel and to be aware of new things, experiencing what we've never known before. My new birth was like that.

I became aware of my own weakness, my inability to control anything including myself, my anger and pride and condescension. And I became aware of other people's weaknesses, their inability to do what I expected of them, and their own particular humanness and sin. Then I knew we were all on the same journey together. I could not do more than other people. I was no better than other people. What I learned to do was to suffer with them, to be with them in their humanness, their weakness, their sin, and their pain – in our humanness, weakness, sin, and pain.

Compassion marked my new birth, my return to this world from the womb. I returned from the tomb, for it was a resurrection, being raised to new life, as the Bible says. And I came forth from the womb as a new creation in Christ. **I am crucified with Christ, Paul wrote, nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ lives within me.**

In these past ten years, my life has been one of growing up in compassion and in love – growing up into Christ, into the compassionate heart of Jesus; learning

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each day how to live compassionately more than the day before; becoming the person God wants me to be, becoming more like God – **kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.** [*Ephesians 4:32*]

For the first time, I began to listen to other people's stories with true compassion. I had been a pastor for 25 years and had talked and counseled with hundreds of people, hearing them tell their stories. But I had always seen my role as the one who should have the answers, who could help them find solutions to their problems.

Now I understand that what they needed was someone to hear their stories, to listen to their hearts, and to care. They needed compassion, not counsel. They needed love, not solutions. They needed someone to sit with them in the ashes of their sadness, their temptations, their grief, their sins, their weakness, their humanness. They didn't need another one of Job's friends – someone who would judge them and tell them what to do. They needed a friend to be with them in the midst of life.

I finally knew that because now that's what I needed from other people. I needed compassion, not judgment. I needed love, not condemnation. I needed someone to listen, to hear, to care, not someone to tell me what to do next.

## **A NEW ENDING TO THE STORY**

I am the older son now, but with a different ending to the story Jesus told. I have gone into the house and joined the party, the celebration of God's love for everyone who returns home. I am letting go of my arrogant claims of religious knowledge and perfection and am entering the kingdom's celebration for those who understand that they are not in charge of their lives.

The only life we have is the life given to us by God, the life of Jesus within us. **The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.** It is not my life, it is Jesus' life. Only Jesus can live it. I will fail every time I try to take it back and control it again. And if I cannot even be in charge of my own life, how could I think I could be in charge of someone else's life?

## **THE NATURE OF COMPASSION**

Compassion has the humility to not tell other people what to do. It understands that we are not in charge of our own lives, let alone the lives of other people. Compassion allows people to be who they are and gives them up to God, just as we accept who we are and give ourselves up to God. Compassion surrenders any pretense of knowing what is best for other people and allows the

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Spirit to work in their hearts and lives in whatever way God desires.

Compassion convinces me that I do not have all the answers. It's easy to say, "Well, the Bible does." But the church's experience over 2,000 years is that we seldom interpret the scriptures the same way, and there has never been unanimity in doctrine.

Church fights over biblical interpretation have divided congregations, denominations, and the church around the world time and again, just as they do today. Professing Christians have rejected, abused, imprisoned, tortured, and killed other professing Christians [not to mention non-Christians] over their differences out of the arrogance of the older son. When a community of older sons has the power, compassion is lost.

Compassion persuades me that the mystery of God is beyond my understanding, that God is always working in the world and in people's lives in ways that I cannot explain and may not even be aware of. The Spirit blows where it will, Jesus said. We often forget that. We want to control the wind of the Spirit. We want to believe that we can tell where the Spirit will move and how the Spirit moves and what people will do if the Spirit is "truly" moving them. Jesus said we cannot do that.

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Compassion moves me to listen to people's stories and learn from them what God is doing in this world. "But we have to test the spirits," someone will say. "Human experience has to be judged by scripture." And I would agree with that. But scripture and my interpretation of it are not identical. What I understand it to say is not always what it says. And what I think God may do is not necessarily what God will do. So I listen to human experience, to people's stories, and read the scriptures, and hold it all up before God and wait for God to continue teaching me what is true and loving.

Compassion and tears go together in my experience. I was seldom without tears for several years, and I cry easily today. In my family men didn't cry. As a child I shut down my feelings, and tears were seldom part of my experience. Now I know that "rejoicing with those who rejoice" means laughing out loud and that "weeping with those who weep" means shedding real tears with them.

Tears and laughter are both signs of compassion. Their absence in a relationship indicates a lack of compassion. In the church, do we laugh easily together out of real joy and not with stifled laughter or uneasy laughter at someone's expense? And do we cry together out of sincere sadness in the moment, ready to shed tears with the one

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who hurts? These are signs of love, signs of the presence of God, signs of our oneness in Jesus.

In Jesus' parable, the older son didn't know how to laugh or cry. He had no compassion for his father or his brother. He refused to enter the house to be with other people. He rejected them because he was convinced he was right and they were wrong. He could not forgive nor accept his younger brother, and he could not understand why his father did. Perhaps he could not forgive his father.

An older son community does not know how to laugh or cry together well. Conversations, prayers, and preaching staunchly proclaim their self-perception of faithfulness to the truth and to God, but God's own love and willingness to forgive and to accept others seem to be lacking. I wonder, sometimes, if they can forgive God for accepting people they have rejected.

Compassion calls me to behavior and actions I still struggle with. When I see obviously handicapped people, I still sometimes look away. My discomfort with their appearance or physical weakness or disability makes me feel helpless. I know it's not really about them; it's about my own weakness. But I'm sure they notice at times how I flinch or look away. They see my discomfort.

God's call to compassion shouts to me through Jesus' words in *Matthew 25* about feeding the hungry,

clothing the poor, sheltering the homeless, visiting the prisoner – and by implication doing whatever I can to help the poor and the weak in our communities. Jesus' words reverberate like an echo chamber, pounding my heart open to go beyond anything I have yet done to help the poor.

I remember James' words which demand an answer: How can I see someone in need and pray for them and send them away without help and think that I have true faith? I don't like those words because they make me feel helpless. What can I do in a world where the needs are so great?

## **COMPASSION AND ABORTION**

Compassion calls us to be life-giving in all we do. And I struggle with that. I am pro-life because God is God of the living. God created all life, and we are responsible for encouraging and preserving life.

Human beings do not come to life just at the moment of birth. Abortion – even natural abortion like an early miscarriage – always means a human being, even in the form of a fetus, has died. Life-giving responses to pregnancy would never make abortion a first choice; indeed, it would always be a final choice. It certainly is for the forming infant.

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Yet life-giving responses to difficult or unwanted pregnancies may demand choices which fall between the first and the final choices available to us. The life of the mother, both as a physical necessity and as a matter of living responsibly and with dignity, may elicit a compassionate choice for her which would end the pregnancy.

I know that many pro-life advocates reject abortion under any conditions. Some demand that it be called murder. I also know that Jesus never spoke about abortion. So we don't know what he would say. I also know the Bible does not talk about medically-induced abortions. So we have no direct word from scripture about the matter.

Compassion for the woman and for the unborn child might well lead us to decisions which a rigid pro-life position does not allow. Respect for the woman demands that we at least consider the circumstances of the pregnancy, the irresponsibility and perhaps abuse of the man involved, the potential consequences of giving birth, and similar factors. Compassion for the unborn child might mean considering what kind of life that child would have and sometimes suggest that ending the pregnancy is more compassionate, more life-giving, than giving birth.

Compassion often leads to difficult choices. The poverty, abuse, and violence of our world make it im-



possible at times to choose what normally would be best or right. I am pro-choice as well as pro-life because I know that the “best” or “right” choice is not always open to us. It is not always a possibility. Sometimes life has become so complex and difficult that we must make choices we don’t want to make. I am also pro-choice because the choice is not mine to make. I am not that woman, and I cannot judge her heart.

Many Christians who call themselves pro-life also supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq where over 1,200 Americans – not to mention perhaps 100,000 Iraqis, including unborn children – have died as I write this. Can such an invasion ever be the “best” or “right” choice? Even for people who supported the military action, surely it was not the first choice. If they believed there had been some other way, would they have thought the U.S. should have invaded? I hope that most pro-life Christians would give a negative answer.

Pro-life principles, to be consistent, must respect the lives of all people. How can we support a ban on abortions and support an all-out military invasion of another country, knowing that it must result in destruction and death for many people? How can we support a ban on abortions and support the dissemination of automatic

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weapons and the state-sponsored killing of other human beings in prison?

Compassion is pro-life. But pro-life is something more than a narrow opposition to abortion. Compassion is life-giving, desiring life for all human beings. It makes us willing to do whatever we can to save lives and to make those lives we save as safe and strong and stable as possible.

## **COMPASSION AND HOMOSEXUALITY**

God's call to compassion moves me in directions I would not have gone in the past. As a leader in the older son community, I confidently taught an interpretation of the scriptures which said that sexual intimacy between persons of the same gender was sinful and unacceptable. I voted for years against every effort to say otherwise.

After my new birth experience, as I began to grow in the ways of compassion, as I began to listen to the stories of people who are gay and lesbian, the Spirit moved my heart and mind to walk a different path on this journey.

I heard people say consistently that just as I had known from childhood that I was attracted to persons of the opposite gender, they had known they were attracted

to persons of the same gender. They had the same desires and feelings I had, but in a different way.

My memories of being attracted to a girl go all the way back to first grade, to a little girl who rode the same school bus. In the third grade, I had my first real “love” who I walked with after school. I remember girlfriends in sixth grade, in ninth grade, and on through high school and into college. I even remember some of their names.

Other people saw all those relationships as cute when I was younger and acceptable as I grew older. What must it be like for people whose attraction from those early years is for someone of the same gender if almost no one thinks it’s cute or acceptable?

Many of them had learned, as I had, from church and culture that same-gender sexual intimacy (commonly called homosexuality) is sinful. They struggled against their feelings and desires. They felt them as normal for them but were constantly told they were abnormal, even sinful. Many tried to change who they were. They dated and even married in heterosexual relationships and found themselves in despair, for they knew it felt wrong for them.

I wish Jesus had said something about homosexuality, but he did not. In all the Bible, there are only a handful of direct references. I returned to the scriptures and read books on all sides of the question of whether

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such relationships are right or wrong. And I have come to an understanding of scripture that God desires love and faithfulness to the other person in a relationship, but that the Bible is silent on whether people of faith can live in a lifelong relationship with a person of the same gender.

The creation stories, in *Genesis 1-2*, focus on the creation of a man and a woman, made in God's image and given responsibility for the rest of creation. The necessity of two people being able to "increase in number and fill the earth" requires them to be male and female. Jesus understood this story [*see Matthew 19:1-9 and Mark 10:1-12*] to mean that God intended two people to continue in a faithful relationship throughout their life together. Jesus was responding to a question, asked out of the hardness of some men's hearts, about whether men should be allowed to divorce their wives for just any reason. These texts do not speak about homosexuality but about the importance of a mutual and faithful commitment to the other person, just as God is faithful to us.

The story of Sodom [*Genesis 19*] is often used to condemn homosexuality because the men of the city wanted to have sex with these two angels who looked like men. But sexual orientation is not the issue. Rather the story at that point is about violence and rape, perhaps even about the ancient tradition of hospitality.

Then and now, heterosexual men commonly use homosexual rape as a tool for achieving power and dominance over strangers, in war and in prison, for instance. Lot even offered his daughters to the men, believing he could appease their violent lust for power, but the angels prevented that.

There is nothing in the story remotely similar to committed gay and lesbian relationships. *Ezekiel 16:49* offers another view that the sin of Sodom was that the people were **arrogant, overfed and unconcerned and they did not help the poor and needy**. Those are sins prevalent in a heterosexual society and have nothing to do with sexual orientation.

Prohibitions against homosexual behavior in *Leviticus 18 and 20* are surrounded by prohibitions against a number of things which are usually accepted today, such as creating hybrid plants, wearing clothing with multiple fabrics, eating steaks cooked “rare,” trimming our hair and beards, and getting tattoos. This “holiness code,” as it is commonly called, also permits some things which are normally condemned today, such as polygamy and slavery. If the scriptures allow us to understand any of these laws to be no longer applicable – such as polygamy and slavery laws – are we not free to reconsider all of them in the same way?

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*Romans 1:26-27* is the only text to include women in the discussion of same sex relations. The question for us is whether what Paul describes is in any way the same thing as a committed, monogamous relationship between two persons of the same sex.

What Paul talks about is how people have refused to glorify God, their Creator, and to be grateful to God, and to worship God. Rather they turned to idols, to “gods” of their own making. In that day people commonly visited temples dedicated to the worship of various gods, and that “worship” often included sexual relations with temple prostitutes, both men and women. In the context of this chapter, many people agree that the sexual relations described here were in the context of idolatrous worship and are not descriptive of committed same-gender relationships.

In the New Testament [*1 Corinthians 6:9* and *1 Timothy 1:10*], two Greek words at the heart of the current debate probably refer to men who regularly engaged in sex with young boys for their own pleasure. That is pedophilia or pederasty, not just homosexuality, certainly not what gay and lesbian Christians experience. Both verses are in the context of describing how some people continue to abuse other people, to refuse to worship God, to be unfaithful to people and to God, to treat other people and

themselves without respect or honor. Gay and lesbian Christians would as quickly condemn such behavior as anyone else.

Given this too brief discussion of these scripture texts, is a person's sexual orientation even a matter of concern to us in the church? Our concern is to be people who worship God, who are faithful to God and to people, who do not abuse but rather respect and honor other people and themselves. Our concern is to encourage faithful, committed relationships of love and grace and faith. If gay and lesbian persons live such lives, the scriptures seem silent on the question of their sexual orientation.

## **COMPASSION'S CALLING**

Some of you reading this book may be ready to discard it right now and declare me wrong and heretical. But if you have read this far, is it not because you know that love is the ultimate moral value and that the first outward signs of that love are compassionate attitudes and actions toward other people?

I readily acknowledge my own discomfort with my journey into new interpretations of scripture and new principles of human behavior. Yet I know the One coming alongside me in this journey and guiding me on the path is One I can trust.

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Because God loves the world, I am called to love the whole world. Because God loves the poor, I choose to love the poor. Because God cares about the deep pain of women considering abortion and cares deeply about people in Iraq and prisoners on death row, I care deeply about them. Because, I am convinced, God freely accepts people of faith and faithfulness without regard to the sexuality which is normal for them, I accept them as well.

God's call to compassion includes a call to political involvement at some level. That remains a mostly unexplored area of calling for me. I grew up in a home where politics was barely mentioned, and until I was a young adult I seldom read the newspaper or watched the news on television. The world was mostly unfamiliar to me. As a Baptist minister in smaller churches in Kansas for nearly 30 years, the common expectation (which I accepted) was that I would not be involved in or even mention politics. Stick to religious matters. That was the rule.

Only in the past decade have I begun to read the Bible differently and see that God's dream for this world is political as well as personal. God desires to heal and to save the individual; but God desires to heal and to save nations and the whole creation as well.



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Compassion for people who are poor, diseased, handicapped, alone, imprisoned, shunned, grieving, and for people who hurt in any way is central to how the scriptures describe God. God's compassion calls me to share the same concern. But so much of the world's poverty and misery come out of decisions made by government and corporate leaders. The system we live in keeps people in poverty and in oppressive conditions.

Political decisions include the laws of a nation or community which regulate corporate and business interests. As long as those laws and regulations give preference to people who have money and who belong to certain majority groups, poverty and oppression will continue. God favors the poor and oppressed, not the rich and powerful or people who happen to be in the majority.

Can God's dream for *shalom* and for the kingdom be realized in this world? That has been the question of the prophets and poets – and the poor – in every age. It has not always been the question of the church or of its leaders. The time is now not only to ask the question but to work for an answer, to work for the Kingdom and to seek *shalom* for the world.

Compassion continues to drive me to new principles, new behaviors, and a new sense of calling in life. I share my story with you in the hope that you may

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recognize something of your own story and perhaps hear more clearly God's calling in your life to live in love and compassion, **to live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.** [*Ephesians 5:2*]

# Grace

**G**race is love freely given, with no restrictions and no demands on the person who is loved. Grace chooses to accept and respect other people simply because they are part of God's creation, made in God's image, and because God loves them. Grace is not only God's gift to us individually, but our gift to other people.

God's path of grace winds gracefully through the woods of this world filled with the sounds of people crying out for simple respect and for love freely given.

Gracious thoughts flow more freely for me now than ten years ago. I confess to a natural tendency to be critical of people, to see them do something "wrong" and to quickly "know" what they "should" do. Because I am naturally passive, I usually would not tell them, unless they asked. But the thoughts and judgments were there.

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As a child I learned what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: **“Do not judge”** and **“First take the log out of your own eye so you can see clearly to take the splinter out of your neighbor’s eye.”** Yet I did not live up to those words. Judgments, even condemnations, came easily.

In the past ten years, an important path of my journey has been to move toward grace, toward love freely given, toward a non-judgmental and gracious attitude toward other people. It is not an easy path to walk.

### **THE GRACE OF GOD**

We hear grace in these words from John’s gospel: **God did not send [the] Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save [heal] the world through him.** [*John 3:17*] God loved the world and sent light into the darkness of this world because of divine grace, as a gift because of God’s own choice and not because of anything we had done. This is the gospel of grace.

If some choose not to accept that grace and choose not to come into the light of God’s love, they are like people given a wrapped present who set it down and never open it and never enjoy it. But the gift was given and will not be taken back.

In *Romans 5* Paul describes God's grace. While we were set against God, while we were still refusing to even acknowledge God, God loved us and gave the Son for us. God's love does not depend on anything we have done or ever will do. Divine love is unconditional.

Divine grace appears from the beginning of the Bible. God created all things, formed the earth and all of creation, created the animals and human beings. Then God said, "It is very good." Creation is love freely given. Creation is grace. Living beings were created to extend their own life and spread out through the whole earth. I imagine that God looked upon all of this, as any creator might, and smiled. Maybe God laughed a hearty laugh that pealed throughout the earth. Grace fills the earth with laughter.

Grace characterizes all that God does. With each story in scripture, we see God's grace in action. Adam and Eve are not destroyed, only kept from returning to a place of unfaithfulness or protected from knowledge too great to bear, perhaps. Cain was not killed after he murdered his brother; rather God put a mark on his forehead to keep other men from doing what God chose not to do. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all made some poor decisions and used people in their lives in ways we might consider

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immoral. Yet God worked through them to establish a people to carry the name of God into all the world.

Moses did not want to go back to Egypt, but then he filled with pride at what God did through him and took credit for it. Rahab was a prostitute. Samson was a violent womanizer and not particularly religious. David committed adultery and ordered the death of the woman's husband so people would assume the baby David fathered belonged to the husband. Solomon taxed the people so excessively, living lavishly with their money, that the people rebelled after his death.

The stories continue all through the Hebrew Bible. God works through the lives of men and women who are far from perfect. Some were not even particularly people of faith or of faithful lives. Some committed what we might call flagrant immorality and sin. Yet God worked in them and through them in ways that changed the world for the better. God's grace is like the melody line holding together a beginners' orchestra trying to play a symphony.

## **PAUL'S EXPERIENCE OF GRACE**

Paul wrote more directly about grace in his letters to the churches than most biblical writers. To the church in Philippi he recounted some of the many reasons he had reason to boast as a Jew and a Pharisee and a man who

had kept the law. Then he said none of that mattered; it was all like refuse thrown onto the garbage heap. He spoke in a gentle, humble spirit and said something like this: “I am not perfect. I have much to learn. But as a runner leaning toward the finish line, I press on with all the energy I have to reach the goal God set out for me.”

*[See Philippians 3]*

God’s grace gave Paul a humble confidence. He knew what he had experienced, and he knew what had been revealed to him. He knew the scriptures, too, but based his preaching and life more on his experience of Jesus through the Spirit than on the tradition he had received. In fact the tradition was what he often challenged and even contradicted if what the Spirit had done in and through him spoke differently.

The early council in Jerusalem *[see Acts 15]* saw these new Christians accept the story of what God did in their midst as more authoritative than the scripture and tradition they had received. Their Jewish scriptures (the Christian Old Testament) taught circumcision as an essential requirement for Jewish men. When Gentiles (non-Jews) believed in Christ, they questioned that.

When the church gathered, and the leaders sought a decision, they listened to the stories of Paul and of Peter and of what they were convinced God had done in bring-

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ing these men and women to faith in Christ and giving them the Spirit. In contradiction to the scriptural tradition, they said it was no longer necessary.

Of the four things they said were still important, though not essential for salvation [not eating food sacrificed to idols, not eating meat with blood or from strangled animals, and abstaining from sexual immorality] one was later rejected by Paul in his letter to the church in Rome as obligatory upon the Christian. Paul said eating food sacrificed to idols was a matter of conscience. [*See Romans 14*]

Paul's experience of divine grace gave him a vision of spiritual freedom greater than most prophets. **It is for freedom that Christ has set us free**, he wrote in perhaps his earliest letter. **Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.** [*Galatians 5:1*] The "yoke of slavery" he warned about is the law, the written letter that kills, as he described it – not the Torah itself, perhaps, but the centuries of additions to it.

Paul understood that grace and freedom go together, freedom from the suffocating burden of trying to live up to law in the form of religious rules and regulations no matter who creates the rules. He admonished these Galatian Christians not to establish their own new regula-



tions nor to try to live up to what other religious leaders, both Jew and Gentile, forcefully urged upon them.

We are not in a right relationship with God because we live up to the law, Paul said. Nothing we can do will accomplish that. Christianity's traditional notion of going to heaven or earning rewards by what we do goes directly against all that the apostle said the Spirit taught him.

Grace is love freely given, not earned, not bought, not gained by begging, but given freely and without reason except God's gracious love.

## **GRACE AND LOVE**

One Wednesday night a small Bible study group talked about whether God hears the prayers of the Jews, because the then-current president of the Southern Baptist Convention said God does not. I advocated for an understanding of scripture which says that God hears all people who call out in prayer for help. Two women argued with me. Finally, one asked: "Then what is the point of being a Christian if God hears the prayers of just anyone?"

Grace does not limit the love of God, nor does it limit God's willingness to respond to the needs of people whoever they are. If God loves the world, then God loves

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the whole world. No exceptions. If God was in Christ reconciling the world, God reconciled the whole world. If God extends grace to anyone, God extends grace to all. Otherwise how could it be grace?

As a child growing up in church and in a Christian home, I learned what Jesus taught. I learned the supreme value of love for God and for each other. But practicing a life of love has to be learned through the temptations, trials, and testing of our relationships with people. We learn how to love slowly, one day at a time, one relationship after another. No two people are alike. No two relationships are the same. Love in one context may not be love in another.

Learning grace often proves to be the hardest lesson of love. To freely give love to people challenges our moral sensibilities because we have been taught that we must earn love. “I love you because....” seems a reasonable, appropriate way to express our love to another person. But the “because” shouts out that our love is conditional, dependent on that specific reason.

Our conscious mind may not think it, but in our soul we ask, “Would you love me IF....” – If I were not whatever that “because” says about me, would you love me anyway? I might ask:

- If I were not handsome, would you love me?

- If I were not a good boy, would you love me?
- If I were not smart, would you love me?
- If I were not ... – would you love me anyway?

When we say “I love you because...,” we may not intend to say our love is conditional, but the inner message says it is.

The journey of love follows the path of grace. If we choose another path, we also leave the way of love. The church has too often chosen another path. If salvation depends on believing a certain set of doctrines, is that grace? If being welcome in a congregation depends on living according to standards set by the people of that church, is that grace? If acceptance at the table (whether literal or symbolic) depends on being in agreement with everyone at the table, is that grace?

Grace does not come easily. We stumble along this path of love because the rocks of religious and cultural expectations keep surfacing. We use “God-language” to make our all-too-human categories of moral and spiritual acceptability sound righteous, including such attitudes as these:

- God hates sin. This is sin, therefore God hates it, and so do I.

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- God can only accept the righteous into heaven. This behavior is unrighteous. This person is not among those who God will accept. Neither can I.
- God says in the Bible that we must believe in Jesus. So those who do not believe in Jesus [the way I do] cannot be accepted.

The variations abound, but the melody the same. It is a harsh tune, a grating sound.

## **MY EXPERIENCE OF GRACE**

Years of living as the older son in an older son community made me rigid. My conscious journey of transformation into a more loving person began suddenly. Within a matter of weeks my eyes opened and cleared as a newborn baby begins to see, not comprehending everything but becoming aware of surroundings and of itself in a new way.

It felt like a death, a tomb-experience. But it was more a womb-experience, a new birth into a way of living I thought I already knew. But I did not.

The way of love had been an intellectual experience, a head-knowledge of something I taught and preached about and urged others to follow. Yet my love came mostly from the head, not the heart or the soul. My

love was conditional, dependent on what other people did or did not do.

As an older son, I had well-established boundaries for myself and for other people. I knew the rules of behavior and belief and issued the call and challenge, the admonition and warning, to other people to live up to them. I thought this was what Jesus meant when he said, **“Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”** [Matthew 5:48] Do what we’re supposed to do. Follow the rules. Stay inside the boundaries.

Living that way made me rigid. A few years after I began this journey of transformation, a man who had been a prayer partner, a friend, and a deacon in the church I served as pastor said to me: “When you came, you were rigid.”

“Rigid?” I responded. “Are you sure you mean ‘rigid’?”

And he said, “That’s exactly what I mean.”

And I knew he was right. I had been rigid. I still am to some extent, but the sharp edges were more rounded now. Other people found me more comfortable to be with, more gracious, more loving than I had been.

I remember the first time in my life when I said I was sorry without adding “but....” to my apology. After

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45 years of life and 25 as a pastor, I finally understood the grace of saying “I’m sorry” without adding anything to it.

I always rationalized the apology because I almost always thought I was right. To this day I consider every decision, almost every word, carefully. I weigh the pros and cons of the consequences of my words, my actions, my decisions at great length. Not as much as I used to, but still too much.

When I considered all the reasons for or against something and made my decision, I was clear in my mind that I made the right decision. If someone didn’t like it, I was sorry they didn’t like it; but I was sure I was right. Apologizing for anything when you are sure you are right is difficult for anyone to do. It was for me.

The day I said I was sorry followed the sudden awareness of who I had been all those years. For the first time I saw my rigidity, my hardness of spirit, my uncompromising attitude. For the first time I knew it didn’t matter if I thought I had done the right thing (or at least had not done anything wrong). What mattered was that I did not truly love the other person from the heart, only the mind. And loving from the mind is never enough.

“I’m sorry you feel that way” is not enough. Grace does not characterize any of these “apologies”:

- “I’m sorry you were hurt.”

- “I’m sorry it happened.”
- “I’m sorry you don’t understand.”
- “I’m sorry, but you...”
- “I’m sorry, but I’m not the only one who...”

We all know the variations on these apologies, either on the giving or receiving end, probably both. And when we’re on the receiving end, we know in our spirit there is no grace, no love, in these words.

Did God suddenly transform me into a paragon of love? Of course not. With Paul I have to say that I am not perfect. I have not arrived. But I am on the journey, and I press on toward the life God intends for me to live, a life of grace, freedom, and love.

## **GRACE AND FREEDOM**

This three-fold foundation for *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius has become an important part of my life in recent years. The formation of lives characterized by grace, freedom, and love takes time. This transformation of life surges out of the scriptures like ocean waves rolling onto the beach and pulling back into the water whatever it finds. The Spirit draws us into the water of life, a great ocean filled with living beings, through this call to grace, freedom, and love. God desires every person to walk this

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path through life and constantly reaches out to draw us into the embrace of divine grace.

In this Ignatian way of spiritual formation, we learn *indifference* as a means of grace. Imagine taking every decision (every word and action), holding it up before God, and saying “Whatever you desire I am ready to do.” That is indifference. I hold up to God every interpretation of scripture, every belief, every perception of what is right and wrong, every moral value, and I say “whatever you desire I am ready to do.” I hold up to God every relationship in my life and say “whatever you desire, O God.”

I hold up to God everything in life and ask for grace to know what God desires. The knowledge of God’s desires comes from within, welling up from the fountain of God’s presence within the heart and soul. Such knowledge comes out of love. It comes out of freedom. I am no longer bound by the rules I once learned, the boundaries I once established, the regulations set for me by others.

Neither am I free to do whatever I choose. Paul also said to the Galatians: **Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.** [*Galatians 5:13*] Love establishes whatever boundaries are needed. Love sets whatever standards are essential. Love formulates whatever regulations are appropriate to the situation.



As I continue this journey, love teaches me that my idea of the boundaries and standards are far different than what God desires. God's love frees us from rigidity, from arrogance, from the false perception that we are always right. Love frees us to say "I'm sorry."

Grace frees us to say, "I don't know everything; maybe I need to understand more than I do about this." Mystery weaves a thread of grace through all of life. It allows us to hold things with open hands and humble hearts. This mystery is not a riddle with a solution, nor a mystery story which has a surprise ending, but deep mystery which encompasses more than we can ever finally know or understand. And it is a mystery that can only be grasped by the heart.

Grace allows mystery to be part of our relationships, knowing that we cannot fully understand any person or any situation. We do not even really know ourselves. How often I have said, "Why did I do that? I'm not like that." But I did it. I said it. Something sits in the shadow of my being which I do not yet fully see or understand.

Paul describes that mystery in *Romans 7*: **I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do....For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do**

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**is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.**

We all live in the same mystery, and so we need to hear one another's stories. We need to pay attention to the mystery in other people, and listening to their stories of what they understand about themselves helps us do that.

### **GRACE LISTENS**

Grace does not judge other people but sits with them, listening to their stories of what has happened to them through life and of who they understand themselves to be.

When I listen to a woman who is considering an abortion, I want to understand (as much as I can) what has happened and why the woman feels so deeply about this. I want to know her story of what led to this moment and her hopes and disappointments, her longing and her despair, that are pushing her in that moment toward a decision to end the life within her.

When I listen to a man who is gay, I want to understand (as much as I can) how he came to that knowledge about himself, what his struggles and fears and joys have been in the journey of life. I want to know his hopes and disappointments, his longing and despair, of what it means to be gay in this culture and in the church.

Grace draws me into listening to the story and mystery of the other person's life and heart, without judgment, without thinking he or she has a problem that needs to be solved. Maybe she does, maybe not. But the other person needs to come to that choice within himself or herself and to ask for help, if help is what he or she seeks. I need just to listen to the story and wait for the person to tell me if he or she needs or wants something from me.

Some years ago I became aware that I found it hard to look someone in the eyes, and that I was often attracted or repelled by someone's face. That awareness made me more conscious as I read and listened to what others experience, and I realized it is a common human experience.

Facial expressions and what we see in another person's eyes are often the first and primary means we have of "reading" that other person. We even have ordinary phrases we use to describe our reactions: He has a kind face; She has shifty eyes; He has a hard look to him; She can see into my soul.

We don't communicate just with words; indeed the words we speak are only a small part of how people understand us. We watch people's faces and eyes as they speak, and we interpret their words – honest, insincere, caring, suspicious – on the basis of whether they look

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directly at us and smile, for instance, or glance away and frown.

My awareness of the importance of “face” in communication opened my eyes when I read the scriptures. “People could not see the face of God,” it says. Or “God looks upon us with kindness.” Or “God looks away from us because of sin.” Or “God’s face turns toward us and gives us peace.”

Grace, I have come to believe, is the embrace of God’s smile. Not just that God is looking our way, not just paying attention to us, but God seeing into our soul and smiling with love at us. And God’s call to grace in our relationships is to be like that – paying attention to people as they are and smiling with love at them.

## **GRACIOUS PEOPLE**

Jesus does not use the word, but grace is the foundation for the Sermon on the Mount. Gracious people are:

- Those who are merciful, pure of heart, and peacemakers
- Those who go and reconcile with someone
- Those who love their enemy
- Those who forgive others even as they seek forgiveness
- Those who seek first the kingdom
- Those who refuse to judge others

- Those who do to others only what they desire in return

As a child I learned the importance of listening to what Jesus said and doing it, like the wise ones who build their lives on the practice of Jesus' words. In my continuing journey, I am learning that such practice includes living in grace as freely-given love.

In *Romans 12*, Paul's encouragement to the Christians in that city also speaks of grace. Gracious people lead lives characterized by:

- Sincere love
- Devotion to one another
- Honoring of others above ourselves
- Joyful hope and patience
- Sharing with people in need
- Practicing hospitality
- Blessing those who oppose us
- Laughing and crying with people according to their need
- Living in harmony with each other
- Being humble and willing to be with all kinds of people
- Refusing to repay evil for evil
- Choosing peace as much as it depends on us
- Seeking to overcome evil with good

The apostle and Jesus both call us by their lives and their words to live gracious lives in all our relationships. The

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way of grace is the way of life for those who claim the name of Jesus.

# Generosity

**G**enerosity is love given with open hands, perhaps with a smile and laughter. Generous hearts freely give away what they have without regret. Generous minds give away honor and respect without judgment or condemnation. Among other lessons in this past decade, I have learned that I am not naturally a generous person.

Self-discovery comes in many forms. For me one means of learning who I am has been the Enneagram, an ancient path to self-knowledge which is rapidly becoming popular as a tool for learning about ourselves. A nine-point diagram helps us visualize nine personality types.

I am a “five” on the Enneagram (the fifth point), which means that stinginess is my primary compulsion or what commonly drives me to do what I do. People with this personality type (a FIVE) live out of the head, rather than the heart or the gut. We watch life go by. We observe

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other people without entering into their lives. We study, analyze, think, and teach, but we do it as much as possible by keeping people “out there,” staying distant in our feelings and relationships.

Stinginess for me is not as much about money or things as it is about myself. I might freely give away money or something I own. Or if somebody borrows from me and doesn't return it, I might not worry about it much. Jesus said something about that, too, in the Sermon on the Mount, in Luke's version. So I felt pretty good about myself when I compared myself to that.

The Enneagram, though, opened my awareness to a different aspect of stinginess. I do not freely give myself away. I do not freely or easily open up and share my thoughts or feelings or life-story with other people. That's how I am stingy. My withholding from other people – my lack of generosity – comes from this internal, personal, spiritual stinginess.

## **GENEROSITY TOWARD GOD**

If I don't freely give myself to people, do I freely give myself to God? If I don't open up to people and talk to them easily and let them know who I am and what I think and feel, am I the same way with God? This has



been a difficult part of my transforming journey of these past ten years.

I made a public profession of faith in Christ and was baptized at age eight. I recommitted my life to God in my teens. I gave my life to a divine call to preach and to serve God through the church when I was twenty. And I moved steadily and dutifully ahead with those commitments all through my first 50 years.

I prayed and taught people how to pray. I preached and taught the scriptures and helped people find their way to God. I spoke often about love for God with all our being because I learned that way of life as a child.

Then I had to face the question of whether my love for God was only head-knowledge or if it was also heart-knowledge. Did I love God from the heart, from within my soul? How could I if I did not freely open up my heart to God? How could I love God with my whole heart if I held back from giving myself completely?

My transforming journey into a greater love for God has led me into a deepening experience of generosity. I am not perfect, of course. I have a long path ahead of me. But I am at least on the path now with my eyes wide open, with my full attention on what is just in front of me as I move forward.

## GENEROSITY TOWARD OTHERS

The church today desperately needs to experience generosity, a love that gives with open hands. When we speak of generosity and giving, most people immediately think of money. And the church does need financial support. But the generosity we need to experience in a greater way today is a generosity of the heart and spirit.

If the church finds a way through our divisions, it will be because we have learned to be generous, to give ourselves away. We must let go of our ideas of what is important long enough to really listen to the stories other people will tell of what is important to them. We may choose to take back the same doctrines, moral standards, and interpretations of scripture we hold now because we understand them to be true. But until we stop grasping them so tightly that we can't let go and listen to different ideas, we will not find a way through the divisions.

Generosity is giving ourselves away. The New Testament calls us to follow in the steps of Jesus, to become like Christ, by learning to be generous. In Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, he calls this city church to follow the example of the rural churches north of them and learn to give themselves away. **They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us**, he wrote. He talks about the grace of giving and their rich generosity. And he bases it

all on the example of Jesus: **You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.** [2 Corinthians 8]

Does Paul refer to Jesus giving away money and making people financially rich? Of course not. He refers to Jesus' generosity of giving himself away even to the point of dying for us. In the same way Peter urges the church to follow in Jesus' steps, saying that Jesus left us an example by his suffering and death for us. [See 1 Peter 2]

Jesus himself spoke of setting an example for us by what he had done. The night before he died, as he met in the upper room with his disciples, he took the role of servants whose job was to wash dust from the feet of guests at a dinner. No one noticed these people. No one paid attention to them. No one cared about them. They were unimportant in the minds of the guests. Yet Jesus became like one of them and washed the feet of his disciples. [See John 13]

When he had finished, he said he did this as an example to them and that they should do the same for one another. This is the context in which Jesus gave that new commandment – to love one another in the same way that he has loved us. Jesus humbled himself, became as one who is unseen and unimportant, and did for the disciples

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what they would never have done for others. That night and the next day, as they all deserted him and denied that they knew him, Jesus suffered and died for them.

Generous love calls us to become like Jesus. Generosity draws us into a life where we let go of our concern for what others think of us. We willingly give ourselves to care for people in their need and let go of the need for reward or recognition. We accept rejection, abuse, even death, if it comes to us in order to continue serving people in need.

Such generosity is beyond my experience, but it is not beyond my calling. Jesus calls us to follow his example of showing such generous love even for those who desert us and turn against us. Generosity expects nothing in return, but gives everything up for God.

## **GENEROSITY AND FREEDOM**

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius reinforces this call to generosity. The qualities of the person entering into the journey of the exercises include openness and generosity toward God and other people. We are called to listen to others with generosity, to be more willing to accept than to reject what they say and always ready to hear what the other person has to say without judgment or condemnation. Perhaps, like me, you learned this as a

child as “giving the benefit of the doubt.” We are also called to freely give ourselves to God during the weeks of the exercises.

Freedom and generosity go together. To freely give – this is the way of generosity. To hold nothing back, not ourselves, our feelings, our possessions, or our love. The earliest Christians in Jerusalem gave us the example of people who claimed nothing as their own but freely shared all they had. [*See Acts 2 and 4*] They shared their possessions, their love, their houses, and their lives. This is the way of generosity.

We find a helpful metaphor for generosity in *Deuteronomy 15* where the people of Israel are urged to provide for the poor in their land. **Do not be hardhearted or tightfisted...rather be openhanded and freely lend whatever [another person] needs.**

Put this book in your lap for a minute. Extend your arm, and turn your palm upward. Close it tight, and hold it for a moment, imagining something precious to you in your hand. How does it feel?

Now open it, and hold it out as if someone in need is in front of you. And give it away. How does that feel?

When we hold tightly to what we have, our whole being feels like our body did for that moment when we held our fist tight. When we open ourselves, and give

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ourselves away, that feeling of release, peace, and joy becomes our daily experience.

Generosity releases the peace of God within our spirit and in our relationships. Joy becomes real in our hearts. Love fills our minds as we think about people we know. The path to peace, joy, and love is paved with this generous spirit.

### **A GENEROUS SPIRIT**

A generous spirit characterizes the new life in Christ described in *Ephesians 4*. The metaphor of extending open hands to people in our lives underlies much of its teaching on the practices of a Christian life.

Humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love are practices which help us keep the unity which the Spirit creates in the church. We cannot create the spiritual reality of oneness in Christ, but we can choose to strengthen it by what we do in our relationships with each other. Giving our emotional energy, our time, and our attention to the slow process of building up rather than tearing down is our calling.

Speaking the truth in loving ways and building up one another in love reinforce the practice of generosity in the church. When love determines what we say and how

we act toward each other, we show to the world that we are the followers of Jesus.

A generous spirit moves us beyond what we might refrain from doing to an intentional choosing of what is good for everyone. Not only do we stop lying, but we choose to tell the truth. Not only do we stop stealing, but we use what we earn by working to help those who are in need. Not only do we refrain from “unwholesome talk,” but we say “only what is helpful for building others up.”

A generous spirit moves us to give up the things which grieve the Spirit of God, such as bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, and all malice. Generosity then stirs us to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, and living a life of love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.

Opening the hands of our heart and mind, we freely give ourselves away through patience, gentleness, forgiveness, kindness, loving honesty, and a gracious generosity of spirit. The calling of God in Christ asks no less than this of us.





# The Way of Love:

## A Proposal for the Church

**W**e live in two worlds in the United States. We are not just Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, Christian and non-Christian. Those are not the primary distinctions. Those labels do not correlate with the two worlds I see.

One world is driven by resistance to the unknown, a desire for black-and-white clarity, a commitment to principles as a priority over people, and a view of the world which says there must be clear boundaries of action and belief and that those who cross the boundaries must be punished.

The other world is driven by desire for what they see as a better world and a willingness to engage what is unknown, a need to allow for uncertainty, a commitment

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to people more than principles, and a view of the world which says the boundaries are not always clear, that many boundaries are artificial and not always good or right, and that “punishment” should be measured and restorative.

One world defines pro-life primarily as against abortion and the other sees pro-life primarily as against abuse and violence, including war. One world sees homosexuality as sinful, even perverted, and the other sees it as part of God’s good creation. One world sees it as divided into groups (religious, national, racial groups), deciding who belongs and who doesn’t and the other sees the world as inclusive and open and seeks a time when most boundaries would no longer exist.

How in this world do we find common ground and move forward together? That’s the great question of our day. Is there any common ground between these two worlds? Are there any bridges between them that might enable us to cross in both directions to explore the other world and bring the worlds together?

## **LOVE IS OUR COMMON GROUND**

Love is the common ground, not “warm and fuzzy” sentimentality, not false tolerance that excuses inappropriate behavior, but strong love that engages people of all kinds with compassion, grace, and generosity.

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We all need love, to be loved and to love. God created us that way. In God's image, we were created to live in loving relationships, for God lives in loving relationship. The Christian teaching of the Trinity – God as three persons in one – describes the loving essence of relationship and provides a model for us to live by.

*Ephesians* says we are **called to be like God** and urges us to **be imitators of God and to live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.** [4:24; 5:1-2] The gospel's foundational message is the love of God and of Christ in this ultimate act of self-giving.

We see in the suffering and death of Jesus the deepest meaning of compassion, grace, and generosity, which are the heart of love. He exposed the dominant powers of this world, showing them to be arrogant and violent, by enduring the cross. How can we choose anything less than this way of love, if we claim the name of Christ as Christians?

The ultimate moral value is a compassionate, gracious, and generous love, full of passion, energy, and power. Love embraces people and confronts the power of evil in this world, revealing a moral vision compatible with the values of God's kingdom, the *shalom* of God's desire.

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Strong love engages people we disagree with through a gracious, generous heart and mind. People motivate us to follow Jesus' way of love because we know even their questioning and challenging of our beliefs and our lives demand a loving response. Do we not want the same from them?

Common ground in the church, at the very least, is the ground of God's love. Our paths follow the firm soil of divine love, clearly marked out by compassion, grace, and generosity. We cross over bridges built from the rocks and minerals of this ground; they are bridges of love.

What I learned growing up, I seek to live by. Jesus said the essence of life is to love God and one another. Paul said the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love and that love is the only thing that lasts. Years of study in the scriptures, graduate research in theology, practical pastoral ministry and preaching, and testing of these thoughts in daily life have all convinced me that the foundation I received is solid.

In the past years I have been learning new meanings of compassion, grace, and generosity and new ways of expressing them. My understanding of the scriptures and of what God desires for us in the living out of these things continues to change, but these shifts of

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perspective happen on the high plateau of the mountain of God's love. Leaving the mountain has not been an option.

This book is an invitation to the church to move forward together into a stronger love, letting go of all things except to love God and each other. To some extent perhaps we all have been "tight-fisted" toward other people, grasping our understanding of scripture and of moral principles so tightly that we have been unwilling to be "open-handed" in giving ourselves to people we disagree with.

### **LOVE AND FEAR**

Fear drives this division within the church. Some people fear discovery. If what they believe, or who they are, becomes publicly known, they fear being ostracized, ridiculed, or fired. They fear the rejection of friends, family, and colleagues.

Some people fear what they do not understand. If they get too close to people who hold views that seem wrong to them, they fear being drawn into something sinful or evil. They fear becoming contaminated by it.

Some people fear losing the traditional moral ground which they have been taught is absolute truth. If they give too much ground to the "other side," they fear a tectonic shift, an earthquake which would swallow up

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everything and destroy it. Or perhaps they fear only a slow chipping away of the foundation.

Some people fear losing control. If they don't keep everything together in their positions as denominational leaders or pastors, for instance, they fear the whole structure will collapse. They feel safer in a false community where people's smiles and easy talk hide the slow erosion of trust and respect needed for true community.

What do we do with these fears? The ancient words are still true: **Perfect love drives out fear.** [*1 John 4:18*] If fear drives the divisions, then perfect love would drive out the divisions along with the fear. If fear is like an iceberg with only the tip showing above the surface, love melts away the ice from below.

Are we afraid of love itself? Are we afraid of what other people will think of us if they really know us? Are we afraid of what we might say or do if we honestly speak up? Are we afraid that we might have to accept or forgive someone we don't want to accept or forgive? Are we afraid that we will lose courage if we publicly engage people in power?

At the core of divine love, we find a transforming power greater than any other. Love melts frozen hearts. Love opens closed minds. Love loosens the hard ground of bitter spirits. Love strengthens the feeble knees and

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faint hearts of the timid. Love converts the shy child who confronts the bully into the community hero. If we choose the creative power of love over the destructive force of fear, we can move together toward unity. We can move together into a place where everyone is safe.

### **A SAFE PLACE**

Someone has said that until everyone is safe, no one is safe. We do not feel safe in the church any longer. The place of safety, the sanctuary, has been stolen from us by the fear we cling to. It has been stolen by words uttered by people on all sides of our conflicts cutting into the tender spots of our spirits, whether spoken from malice or ignorance. Only love for everyone can set us free and create the sense of safety and security we need to openly and freely live together in the midst of our disagreements.

Creating community that feels safe for people is not easy, but it is possible. People gather regularly in our home for prayer, for meals, for meetings of different kinds. We talk openly about our fears, questions, joys, sadness, gratitude, whatever we are experiencing in the moment. We listen to each other with love, sometimes inviting people to say more when they are hesitant, sometimes just affirming what they feel, sometimes praying with them. We laugh. We cry. We hug.

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People experience healing in these gatherings. We know we are loved and accepted here. We know we will not be judged by others in the group. We know we can express anger, happiness, doubt, faith, fear, sadness, grief, excitement, or whatever we are feeling at the time. We can tell our stories, however good or bad, sad or happy, and people will listen with respect, acceptance, and love. We experience community as a safe place.

Scripture offers many metaphors for God as the One who makes us feel safe and secure -- the good shepherd, a rock, a mountain, the hen gathering us under her wings, the mother holding us as an infant at her breast, a cloud covering and hiding us, the host offering us protection in the tent and providing a feast, the father welcoming us home as lost children, and many more.

God desires the church, as the body of Christ, to also be a place of refuge, of safety and security, a place for us to be safe from what threatens us. Yet in the current climate of the churches and denominations in America, we experience just the opposite.

When we go to denominational meetings or gather with other Christians or perhaps even go to our own congregation for worship or study, we often do not feel safe. We experience suspicion, anger, lack of respect, and



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condemnation. We experience a lack of compassion, grace, and generosity. We do not experience love.

Why not? What can we do? How can we create in our homes and churches and denominational meetings a place that will be safe for everyone? Love sets us free from fear, but unless we create space where people can love without fear, how will we be free? We can choose a love that enables us to create safety, to provide a place of security for people to sit and talk together about their thoughts, hopes, fears, and dreams. We can choose a love that provides a safe place to disagree, knowing we will be welcomed for who we are.

We are safe when we know diversity is welcomed, even encouraged, when agreement is not forced or even expected. We are safe when we know people will listen to our deepest feelings with deep respect and will not judge, criticize, or condemn; rather we will be loved as we are.

God's love creates a safe community. God loves us as we are, listens to every feeling and thought, honors us as loving parents honor their children. God's love flows from the divine heart to our hearts, creating in us a desire to love others as they are, to listen to their feelings and thoughts, to honor them as members of the same family.

God-given love assures us that we will be treated with compassion, grace, and generosity by other people in

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this place. We can say what is in our hearts and minds, knowing that we will not be rejected even if other people do not accept our ideas. As God's love flows through us to one another, as the Spirit energizes and enlivens us, as God's presence becomes palpable and God's love tangible, we will know that we are in a safe place.

### **ONE IN THE SPIRIT**

The history of the church bears testimony to the all-too-human reality that we will never all think alike. The hope that some creed or statement of faith or set of doctrinal propositions or list of moral values will unify us is a false hope because it has never worked. History gives abundant testimony to that reality.

We are one in the Spirit, not in any one understanding of what the Spirit says. We are one in Jesus Christ, not in any specific written expression of who Jesus is and what our relationship to Christ must be. We are one in God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, not in any creed or statement that seeks to define God.

We are of one blood and race, the human family, created by God in God's image. We are neither Democrat nor Republican, neither liberal nor conservative; we are all one in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. We are neither male nor female, Paul said, and I would add neither gay nor

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straight, neither pro-life nor pro-choice; we are all one in Jesus Christ through the Spirit.

God's gracious, loving choice made us one, and all our human attempts to divide cannot negate God's choice. But our human divisions can make it impossible to experience the unity given us by God.

Where the Spirit of God is, there is peace, the Bible says. Where God's love is known and felt, there is safety, a sense of refuge and security, a place where we are not afraid. One common invitation in Scripture is "Be not afraid." The words are spoken when God's presence is clearly expressed. God's loving, compassionate, gracious, and generous presence makes us feel safe.

Can we say to each other, "be not afraid"? Will they believe us if we say it? Can we let people follow the path they believe God is leading them down and trust God to guide them? If people are on a wrong path, or if they are living contrary to God's desires for them, can we trust the Spirit to convict them and move them in a different direction? Can we be together in God's presence, knowing the grace of God alone makes any of us "acceptable" before God, and trusting God with that other person's life?

The challenge to the church in our day is to do all we can to create safe places for people to be together, to

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create an environment – as much as it is up to us – where people can live and work and worship in safety. A place where people can talk and discuss their differences without fear. Where people know they are honored, respected, trusted, and loved, and where God’s presence is palpable.

Nothing less than this will provide the common ground upon which we can move forward together. Is this a hopeless dream? An impossible vision? A utopian day-dream that has no basis in reality?

Or is it the kingdom of God? Is it the *shalom* of which the prophets spoke? Is it God’s desire and dream – God’s will – for us, especially as Christians who claim the name of Christ Jesus?

## **THE CURRENT DISSENSION**

In the current climate of the church in America, especially around the question of inclusion of persons who are gay and lesbian, the loudest voices come from leaders on the outer edges of the conflict.

Voices calling for full recognition of gay and lesbian persons within the life and ministry of the church have often been strident, sometimes angry and trembling with the passion of the rejection and oppression they have felt, and at times humble and loving.

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Currently the traditional voices calling for clear definition of all practice of homosexuality as sinful and for an end to dialogue on the question have intensified. At times these voices are angry, and at times they are humble. Yet now procedural actions to bar clergy and congregations who represent the emerging voices from speaking out are underway.

Most people feel unsafe in this turmoil which is driven by fear, with many people unwilling to speak out.

Can the church become a safe place for people to live and talk together even when they are divided about something so important to everyone? Safety is central to the challenge of living together.

When people feel unsafe in their environment, they stop talking. They stop meeting. They stop believing in each other. They stop seeing the face of God in each other and start seeing the face of “the enemy” who cannot be trusted or honored or loved.

Can the church learn to live together with a compassionate, gracious, and generous love? The history of the church gives little reason to think we can. But I’m an optimist. More than that, my hope is in God and not in history. God has made the church one body in Christ and calls us to live that reality in our relationships. What God has called us to do, God will give us grace to do.

## **A GRACIOUS SEPARATION**

Is there a way to keep everyone in the family? Maybe not, although I wish there were. Jesus prayed for the church to live as one, and so do I. But so far we have not found a way. Some people are determined, it seems, not to have Christian fellowship with people who hold strong convictions on the other side of the question concerning homosexuality. Can that change? Yes. Will it change? I don't know.

In a marriage, if one spouse decides that the relationship is over and that he or she is leaving, there is seldom anything the other spouse can do ultimately to save the marriage. This may be an apt analogy for what is happening in my denomination.

I am convinced, though no one has surveyed the church in this way, that 75% of people in the mainline denominations would accept the diversity of a more inclusive church if we could then move beyond this question of homosexuality to do the mission and ministry to which God has called the church.

I know many conservative leaders are convinced the opposite is true – that the vast majority of people in the pews want the question settled by denominational policy opposing acceptance of gay and lesbian persons as

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leaders and clergy and saying the practice of homosexuality is unacceptable.

When people are asked if they think homosexuality is compatible with Christian teaching, or some variation of that question, a majority still tend to say no. But who has surveyed the churches to ask if people think the church should be open to everyone or if they think God's love is unconditional or if they believe freedom of conscience and of interpretation of scripture is more important?

Where are the surveys asking if people consider love the most important value? Or the surveys asking if they would be willing to leave the question of homosexuality to individual conscience so the denomination can move forward with the rest of its mission?

Have the members in the pews been asked the simple question of whether they think the denomination should split? Or is the primary impetus for that movement coming from leaders beating the drums of schism and inflaming the passions of people who might be willing to choose a different path?

The way questions are posed makes all the difference in determining "majority opinion" on any issue. I believe that a large majority of the people in most Christian denominations in the United States today favor a more inclusive church without rancor and wrangle over

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issues, a church focused on a mission of proclaiming God's love and living in that love in this world.

We have struggled desperately to save the denominations, arguing, debating, voting, being silent. So far we have not succeeded. Maybe it is time to allow the freedom for people to choose gracious separation, if that is what they want. Maybe it's time to let some congregations and clergy go their own ways, if they choose, and unite the large majority who remain. If we don't do that, we may be choosing to continue the struggle until nothing remains.

Property is a significant obstacle to letting some congregations go. Some denominations retain ownership of the property of local congregations if the local church body chooses to leave the denomination. The congregations are appropriately concerned about losing their property. And the denominational structures couldn't absorb the demands of maintaining the property anyway.

Money is another obstacle to letting congregations go. Some churches threatening to leave are strong financial supporters of the denominations, which are already struggling to stay alive financially. The logical question is how the denomination would continue without that support

These are serious obstacles to separation. But what will happen if there is no gracious separation and the



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struggle culminates in congregations leaving and lawsuits being filed over property and money? Does anyone believe God would desire that? Does God want us to continue consuming so much energy on this struggle rather than putting our energies into the mission of Christ in the world?

God desires us to live together in love, in relationships marked by compassion, grace, and generosity. If that is not possible for some people because of their commitment to certain moral or theological principles, gracious separation may be the only alternative. Given this challenge, there may be two alternatives – either to continue an increasingly bitter struggle for the control of the denominations, which could end in rancorous lawsuits, or to allow gracious separation for those who choose that course and to engage the diverse majority in ongoing relationship.

### **LOVING TRANSFORMATION**

This invitation to the church captures the essence of who God is and of God's call to the church in the process of creating new ways of living together, perhaps new relationships or new structures for the church. I believe this is God's invitation to all of us, to the whole world, certainly to the church. We are invited by God to

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move toward love and into a greater compassion, grace, and generosity.

How do we begin in a practical way to seek just, peaceful, and loving transformation of our conflicted situation, leading to reconciliation among the people involved? Even gracious separation has an element of reconciliation because if it is done well different groups can maintain their integrity and values and live peacefully at a distance within the larger church.

We cannot continue with our survival mentality, reacting to every challenge or threat from any group by appeasement, seeking only to save the denominations. We must move toward creating the safe place, the sanctuary, of God's loving presence.

Fear drives the attempt to appease threatening forces in the hope that we can "keep the family together." Fear increases insecurity and instability of the family and thereby worsens the conflict we are trying to resolve. As long as we continue to live in fear, we will gain nothing; rather we will eventually lose everything.

Love drives out fear. Love creates a sense of security and stability. Love leads us on a path toward reconciliation. Love may not resolve all the conflicts or end all the disagreements; but it will keep us together or help us to separate graciously, for it contains the seed of faith-

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fulness to one another and to God which, in time, bears the fruit of true unity.

What is our goal? Is it to accommodate and compromise? It is easy to be reactive, either being angrily defensive or trying to appease threatening forces in an attempt to hold things together. The first only stokes the fires of conflict, and the second is like waiting out the small tremors before a big earthquake, hoping the quake will not come.

If our goal is to create a safe place in the church for people to live together, in all their diversity, our responses will be different. We will be driven not by fear but possessed by love. We will resist the temptations and lure of angry words, self-righteous judgments, unfeeling pronouncements, exclusive policies, and unloving relationships. Rather we will choose to open ourselves to the transforming power of compassion, grace, and generosity.

We have suffered one trauma after another in the churches, at denominational meetings as we have debated and voted on resolutions and policies, in smaller groups as we have felt forced to conform or as we have confronted and too often condemned others in the church, in too many conversations where we have listened to and passed on rumors of what we have overheard from other sources.

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These repeated traumas have left us frozen, pumped up for another fight, or ready to run away from it all.

We are left exhausted, angry, and without energy to continue. But God's love can renew our resiliency, the ability to bounce back from another meeting or conversation, the willingness perhaps even go to another meeting or engage in another conversation. How do we experience that renewed energy and build such resiliency in the churches and the denominations?

## **SAFE PLACE COMMUNITIES**

That ability to bounce back with a willingness to return to places where we have suffered traumas of hurt, anger, offense, and rejection comes when we feel that we can return to a space that is safe for everyone. Only God's love will provide that safe space. When people gather in the Presence with a mutual commitment to compassion, grace, and generosity in their hearts, their words, and their actions, only then will we experience a safe place to be together.

That seemingly impossible task is the invitation of this book. If hope exists for our denominations and churches, we must learn to live together in God's love. We must find enough people willing to journey together in this spirit, with a full commitment to participate in a com-

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munity which is safe for everyone, where everyone feels loved.

For our conversations to feel safe, all participants agree to follow certain guidelines. There is nothing new in what I present here. *Peacebuilding* groups and *conflict transformation* programs have been teaching this way of relating for many years. (If you want to know more than this summary includes, do an internet search of these terms, and you will find more resources than you can use.)

This approach to community building and caring group interaction may be familiar or it may be new. But for all of us this can serve as a review and reminder of practical guidelines for engaging other people in conversation and in relationships in ways which can create safe space for all participants.

Here is my suggested covenant for groups desiring to create a safe place for their members to live together in love.

### ***A Safe Place Covenant***

Believing that love is the ultimate moral value because Jesus calls us to love God and one another above all else, we agree to ask ourselves and each other one core question: “Does this contribute to love?”

We agree to measure our thoughts, feelings, words, and actions by this one question, with the help of God’s

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Spirit. As much as possible, we will not speak or act until we have reviewed ourselves in this way. And if the group challenges our words or actions by this question, we will allow them to help us examine again what we said or did.

We agree that the practices of compassion, grace, and generosity are primary evidence of love, and we commit ourselves to engage each other in conversation and relationship by following these practices to the best of our understanding.

We agree to seek to live together in love by being faithful to these guidelines for our attitudes and behaviors:

- Honor each person as one created in the image of God and loved by God.
- Ask God's blessing for each person and for ourselves as we seek to see and hear as God does.
- Listen prayerfully, attentively, and without judgment to each person, being generous in our interpretation of what we hear and assuming a good motivation for what was said.
- Speak for ourselves and not for others, using "I" rather than "You" as we tell our stories.
- Ask for more clarification to ensure better understanding before responding, especially when what was said seems unclear or inappropriate.

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- Give each person appropriate time to finish his/her story or thought before anyone responds.
- Agree to one exception – when something that is said feels hurtful or harmful, others in the group may interrupt to say, “Ouch! That hurts; that didn’t feel good...,” and may ask the person to say it a different way or to ask for clarification of what was said.
- Invite full disclosure of a person’s story, feelings, and ideas, granting complete confidentiality – that nothing said will be repeated in another place without that person’s permission.
- Allow for silence after each sharing of a story.
- Grant permission for anyone to ask for a time of silence and/or prayer, suspending the flow of conversation temporarily.
- Agree as a group to act with loving responsibility to provide emotional safety if any member of the group feels distressed or anyone becomes verbally or physically threatening or abusive.

### **SAFE PLACE GROUPS**

God’s ways of love are beyond our ways. The Spirit often moves in ways we do not plan. No one can

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create an agenda for Safe Place gatherings stating exactly what the group will do and discuss in a given period of time. Meetings driven by a formal agenda, or even people's informal and unwritten agendas, seldom allow the Spirit freedom to move as God desires.

A general structure to guide the process, however, can be helpful. If the participants have a common understanding of what they might do together, the meetings will flow more smoothly. These gatherings could be filled with a variety of activities, given the movement of God's Spirit. These are essential activities for a Safe Place group:

*Prayer* – Prayer serves as the basic activity in the sanctuary and the context of all that happens. Safe Place groups are Sanctuary groups, experiencing the presence of God, acknowledging the divine presence in many ways, giving their attention to how the Spirit moves them.

Verbal prayers may be offered by members of the group in traditional ways – opening and closing prayers, sentence prayers, time set aside for prayers, prayers as part of worship. Nonverbal prayer, sometimes called centering, can also be helpful and is often done at the beginning.

Silent prayers of the heart are essential to these groups. They may be offered throughout the times of conversation, study, dialogue, and other group activities.



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Ask God's blessing on others – and on ourselves to see and hear as God does. Seek discernment for what to say and when to be silent. Offer wordless prayer as we wait upon God to speak or act, not even knowing what to pray.

Silence can be planned, such as agreeing to brief silence following someone's sharing of his or her story. At times someone will sense the group needs to stop and be silent, waiting for the Spirit to move or to speak. One or more persons may then pray aloud, or the group may return to its conversation. This, too, is prayer.

*Scripture reading* – Reading scripture serves a core role in the activities of the group. Christians believe that God has spoken through the scriptures, revealing much that we need to hear. We believe that God continues to speak through the Spirit, so we listen to scripture with that expectation. Our understanding of God and ourselves, of the church and the world, of all reality, comes primarily out of scripture. It holds an unparalleled authority for the church.

Scripture texts may be chosen before the group gathers to be used for reading, prayer, study, and discussion. The scriptures presented in this book may be a good place to begin. [A companion to this book is also available with additional resources for scripture reading.]

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A divine reading of scripture, called *lectio divina*, may be used as one means of listening to what God wants to say to the group, hearing with the ears of the heart. This approach is best used in smaller groups, so if your group is large you may want to form new groups for this time.

A common way of following this model is to read slowly one passage of scripture, often not more than a dozen verses; the group silently listens to what the Spirit may be saying, centering the heart and mind in God. After a second reading, each person speaks one word or phrase from the text which speaks an important word in that moment. After a third reading, each person may share aloud what God seems to be saying in that word or phrase. After a fourth reading, each person may share how God seems to be leading, what the Spirit may want to do. Prayer bathes the entire experience in a sense of being with God.

Many ways of reading scripture are available to us. The method is not as important as that we are listening together in love to what we understand God to be saying to us individually and as a group.

*Listening to stories* – Telling our stories is a core activity. Whether we call it testimony, witness, or sharing, we tell the group what we understand God is already

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doing in our lives. The Jerusalem Council, in *Acts 15*, did this as a primary activity.

Our stories are all different. We will at times tell of trauma and tragedy, of sadness and grief. At times we will speak of laughter and joy and victory. We may talk of deep hurts, of offenses received or given, of anger and bitterness. We may share deep peace, forgiveness, healing, and conversion experiences. Stories are holy ground.

Our stories help other people know who we are, why we live as we do, and why we hold certain convictions. When we listen to each others' stories, we understand the other person more than ever, and more than we would by simply talking about ideas, beliefs, and interpretations of scripture. We can argue with people's ideas, but the story is theirs to tell without disagreement.

One aspect of story-telling is to listen in love to the different ways in which people have experienced the group's history. For members of a local congregation, for instance, or a group which has been together for several years, there is a common history. But each person has experienced the relationship differently, just as in a marriage the spouses tell different stories of the history of their relationship.

In listening to all the stories, we may discover why we are so different or why we are in conflict, if we are. For

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our experience is our reality, our truth, even though it differs from others. In the listening we can begin to construct a new story for the group's future by choosing how we will live together from now on.

*Conversation* – Conversation about what is important to us is an essential activity. Every group has members with very different perspectives of what is most important, whether the issue is moral values, religious doctrine, interpretation of scripture, or the way the organization operates.

Honoring each person means we will listen attentively and prayerfully to one another's perspectives. I need to know what each person considers important and to hear the reasons why. And I need each person to listen to me. In these Safe Place groups, our conversation will be faithful to the covenant we adopted.

Different models for this kind of conversation can be used. One method is to go around the circle, usually allowing people to pass if they want to. Each person gets a certain amount of time and can choose to speak or to be silent during that time. Brief questions for clarification may be allowed.

Introverts, especially analytical persons, may need more time to gather their thoughts before they speak; this model allows for that need. Extroverts, especially spon-

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taneous persons, may be unaware of the time and keep talking beyond the allotted time; this model monitors that tendency.

Once we know what we each consider important and why, we can begin to consider what we will talk about first and why it needs to be discussed. Knowing why each person considers something important is as necessary as knowing its importance to him or her. We may find some common ground in the reasons why even if what we define as important differs.

The reasons we consider something important are part of our story, and until we hear each other's story we may not be able to understand their reasons. So listening to stories may well come before conversations about what is most important.

*Discernment* – Discerning what God desires for this group is an important activity. The group's purpose in coming together may not require decisions about what it does beyond these gatherings. However, most groups – congregations, clergy groups, denominational bodies – cooperate in ministry, mission, worship, public advocacy, and a variety of activities. Their continuing work together requires them to discern as a group what God desires.

Discernment is not just about making decisions. We want to discern the heart of God and the Spirit's

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movement in our life together. Learning to discern well begins with centering in Jesus and seeking the kingdom in our midst. It requires the humility to say, “I don’t know,” and the ability to be indifferent to all but God’s will.

All the other activities feed into this one. While there is no simple step-by-step progression of activities, and stories, prayer, scripture reading, conversation, and discernment all interweave as the activities of a group, making a decision about group identity or the nature of mission can only be done well when enough time has been given to the other activities.

Discernment of the Spirit’s leading for a group comes out of ample time spent in prayer, reading of scripture, listening to our stories, and probably extended conversation about what is important and why.

The group then needs to test its sense of discernment. One way to do that is to ask questions like, “Where did I feel God’s presence?” and “What am I grateful for?” Another way to test the discernment is by returning to the other activities, going again to prayer and scripture, to story and conversation. Only when the group’s sense of discernment is clear can the group move decisively, confidently forward into the future God has in mind for it.

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### **SAFE PLACE GROUP NETWORKS**

The more Safe Place groups we create, and the more they network for mutual support and accountability, the greater their impact on the church. I do not imagine a formal network organized as a formal structure with official leaders. Any network authorized by an existing organization or denomination will probably not work because it would be obligated to live within the system which is already struggling.

*Safe Place groups might be organized within congregations.* Many local churches are not experienced as safe places now, so new groups would be formed for the purpose of providing sanctuary for people who want to learn how to live together in love. All would be welcome to participate as long as they are willing to live by the Safe Place Covenant adopted by the group.

If you initiate a Safe Place group in your congregation, invite people with a diversity of beliefs and practices. Extend the invitation to people you know disagree with you on key principles and ideas to talk with you, to pray and read scripture with you, to seek the heart of Christ together.

*Safe Place groups might include people from several congregations.* I do not imagine seeking board or congregational approval for these groups or making this a project

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of the whole congregation. I envision individuals with a fervent desire to see the church live together in love inviting other people they know to their homes or some neutral place for these informal gatherings. Seeking organizational approval and authority might shut down the effort quickly because of the same fears that generate the current divisions.

I know many people of different churches and denominations who share similar desires to see the church spiritually thrive in love. They also are quite diverse in their theological and moral beliefs. Would some of them not be willing to create sanctuary for people to begin this journey toward a church united in Christ?

*Safe Place groups might be organized as clergy gatherings.* Existing clergy groups might choose to spend time together intentionally to provide a safe place for their members to engage in the activities I have described here. Or new, informal gatherings could be organized to provide a new space.

Most communities have several clergy groups, often distinguished by their differences in theology or liturgical practice and sometimes by their differences in moral and political commitments. Perhaps some of the clergy from these different groups would be willing to



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agree to the covenant and to a number of gatherings as a Safe Place community.

*Safe Place groups might be initiated within a single denomination.* Their purpose would be to bring together people with a diversity of ideas who are willing to live together in love and are willing to agree to the Covenant in their gatherings.

Denominational Safe Place groups might be organized geographically, with clergy and lay leaders from a defined area, or formed by people who serve together in an existing group who see the importance of gathering informally at another time or by using part of their time at the formal meetings for this purpose.

*A Safe Place group network would be a work of love,* literally and figuratively. No formal structure would support it financially, paying for people's time and travel and providing publicity, except that grant funds might be found to help with expenses. People filled with desire for the church to live in love and unity would initiate invitations for people to join them and give leadership to these groups.

I do not imagine that these would necessarily be continuing groups. Any one group, meeting locally or nationally, either within one congregation or within a

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national denomination, might choose to meet six to eight times and then dissolve.

Multiple small groups meeting on their own, generating still more groups, could create a grassroots movement spreading out into the whole church. It could. It is possible. Whether it will, only God knows. But it's worth our time and energy if only a few people experience a way of living together marked by compassion, grace, and generosity and if they experience the unity of the Spirit in a way they've never known before.

The transforming power of God's love experienced in diverse communities can create a church few of us have known. Seek first the kingdom of God, Jesus said, and all these things will be given to you.

People will be encouraged and empowered to tell their stories freely because they know they are in a safe place. People will be able to talk about how they have been hurt or why they feel at risk or threatened by others in the larger community. People will have a place to be heard where they will not be afraid to say whatever is in their hearts. This is *shalom*. This is the sanctuary, the safe place, God desires the church to be. It is the kingdom of God.

## A Final Word

**M**y experience of the power of God's transforming love continues. And so does yours. I invite you to join me on the journey.

Do you want the church to burn like a warm fire in the hearth, giving light and peace to all the family? Do you want to help create bridges we can build between the two worlds we inhabit so we can learn to live together with respect and love?

Join me on this journey of compassion, grace, and generosity. Do you want to experience a love that listens, a love that is freely given, a love that is given with open hands? The path of love is difficult. It is nearly impossible when we travel it alone. It becomes easier when we walk together.

Would you initiate a Safe Place group in your congregation, community, or denomination to help create

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a network such as I have proposed? Call a few people today and invite them to join you. Each of you invite someone else. Begin meeting. Invite others to begin gatherings in their area. And may the transforming love of God empower you.

May the love of God unite us through the Spirit and make us one in Jesus Christ that all the world will know that we are his disciples because we have love for one another.

# Resources

## **On the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius:**

David L. Fleming, S.J. *Draw Me Into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises, A Literal Translation & A Contemporary Reading.* [The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1996]

## **On the Enneagram:**

Renee Baron & Elizabeth Wagele. *The Enneagram Made Easy: Discover the 9 Types of People.* [HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 1994]

Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert. *Discovering the Enneagram: An Ancient Tool for a New Spiritual Journey.* [The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1990]

## **On Peacebuilding:**

STAR (Seminars on Trauma Awareness and Recovery), a joint program of the Conflict Transformation Program and Church World Service – Contact the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University, 1200 Park Road, Harrisonburg, Virginia 22802. <http://www.emu.edu/ctp/star-intro.html>.

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## **About the Author:**

Jimmy Reader combines 35 years as a pastor with experience as an adjunct college instructor in business ethics and as a seminar leader with a national business training company coaching people in communication and relational skills. His Doctor of Ministry work at Princeton Theological Seminary focused on conflict, change, and transformation. His recent training has been in conflict transformation and trauma awareness and recovery. He brings an interactive style of teaching and coaching to his work as a consultant and a retreat and workshop leader.

Jimmy and his wife, Joy Bergfalk, live in Rochester, New York. They are part of the leadership team of Life Listening Resources, a nonprofit organization providing a variety of resources to help people listen to life and become spiritually-centered, compassionate, respectful, empowered, and integrated individuals and communities.

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