

## The Wound of Love

The psalm this morning is more a cry of anguish than it is a song. Or maybe it would be better to say that it is a song, but one of deep lamentation. A cry to God, a cry of anguish from someone who has been to the depths—to the pit, which he calls, simply, ‘the dead’ where one hears ‘wailing’ [vs. 12] and ‘weeping’ [vs. 6], where ‘fear’ [vs. 8] is all around and where one wonders if death might be a welcome release from a life that seems to be a living death; what kind of life is it when God’s face is hidden and is replaced with the experience of burning wrath, a kind of isolating torture of a twisted soul. When God’s face is hidden from us, even the faces of our nearest and dearest seem to go cold before our eyes—or perhaps it is our own faces that have grown cold. In the pit the child of God’s cry for mercy is drowned out by drumbeats of despair.

What is the cause of the psalmist’s great suffering? He doesn’t tell us; perhaps he can’t. Is it really possible, writes the Algerian writer H el ene Cixous, to hold a pencil in hell—to write its fire and stench? And, we might ask ourselves, do we really need to know? Do we really want to know? Isn’t it enough to know that all this lamentation and agony is now finally over, that the morning light has come—that there is now, even for this once darkest of souls, ‘dancing’ and ‘joy’? Should we say, perhaps, that it is the wailing and fearful times which provide the dark shadows of life, a dark backdrop against which shine all the brighter the graces of our lives? And that it would be a sin to linger too long at the precipice of this horrific site of death, this concentration camp, whose dark energy risks pulling us into its ravenous maw? What’s the use of such attention paid to the abyssal depths of suffering, when nothing can be undone, no debts paid which will lighten the burden of the traumatic past as it clamors for an ear to listen to its wail? When what’s done is done, isn’t it best to turn our attention to what brings joy, to the light rays of the sun as dawn breaks, and give thanks that the past is safely stowed away where it can no longer harm us?

In the second of his expositions of our Psalm for this morning, Saint Augustine preached the following words, as he too was wrestling with what to make of these cries from the depths of life: ‘People who are making no progress in the Church are unaware of these spiritual torments; they think there is peace.’ Of course for Augustine, to think ‘there is peace’ is more than mere naivete. For what this most introspective of saints saw all too plainly was tribulation, warfare, torture and strife; whether he was looking within the sanctuaries of the churches he oversaw, or to the violent political times in which he lived, or even simply within his own burning and restless heart. To be alive, at least if alive meant living in the real world, rather than an indulged one of one’s own imagining, meant tribulation, affliction, strain of all kinds. Of course, one could try to avoid this—we Americans after all did not invent the idea of a culture of technological smokescreens from reality—the Romans were quite gifted at this game of looking away from the tormented faces of their brothers and sisters—but for Augustine, this would mean the greatest blasphemy of all—to turn away from the suffering of the world would be to turn away from Christ, who came to us only as wounded, permeable flesh—pulled apart by the world to show us the very source of God’s love in the broken heart of Jesus.

“Fuller knowledge means increased sorrow,” Augustine continued, thinking immediately of Christ’s knowledge of sin, born in his spirit and flesh. He spent a good deal of the

latter chapters of his most famous book, the City of God, sorrowing over and over with the knowledge he had, quite personal, of the sin of the world—our world, our Abu Graib, modern death camps, waterboarding, child slavery, sexual violence in homes, churches, and on the streets, none of this would have surprised Augustine, nor would have our desire to turn away from it all by either aestheticizing it through our video culture, or by simply shutting our eyes and ears. Sometimes its just more than we can bear.

Bear one another's burdens, Paul writes in the epistle for today, and so fulfill the law of Christ. To bear, *bastazw* in the Greek, is one of the profoundest words in our Christian vocabulary. Mary 'bore' her son Jesus, both before and after his birth, Christ 'bore' the cross on his way to Golgotha, and we in turn are encouraged to 'bear' our cross, (which is still his) and follow Christ into the world—where we see the lame bodies of the destitute being 'born' by the healthy. Paul tells us that we are to bear with one another in our weaknesses, our infirmities, and who does not have extra weight that his loved ones are often forced to bear? And yet, Paul tells us, we each have to bear our own burden, we cannot pass it off by blaming others or by attacking them—should we not have known that no manner of shock and awe inflicted on our enemies after 9/11 could possibly have relieved this nation of the need to bear our own sorrow, and that our failure to do so has added burdens to the rest of the world, which they now bear as their own.

Most importantly, Paul, at the very end of his letter to the Galatians, writes that he is in a sense immune to attempts of others to burden him with what they themselves refuse to bear; and note, immune *not* because he will refuse to accept such burdens, which would contradict his earlier command precisely to 'bear one another's burdens', but because, he writes, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." Wounded by love—as the Sg of Songs puts it—Paul has had his heart stretched wide by the death and life of Jesus which is now his own death and life—he can no more close his heart to the sufferings of his enemies than he can to his own—for in Christ, they are one.

Have you ever stayed awake with a feverish child whose cries are unconsolable and pierce your heart with their plaintive innocence? Stayed with a beloved friend or family member as they struggled with addiction for year after torturous year, wondering if they would ever hit rock bottom of the pit and begin to ascend? Or listened to the heart-rending story of a survivor of physical or sexual abuse and, though you could do nothing to change the past, and the future too seemed bleak to the eyes, stayed in the present while they howled and cried at the madness of the evil done and the good left undone by those responsible? Have you listened to the story of a wartorn mother and child as their entire world has been blown apart by forces against which they and you are no match? Then you, like Paul, and like the psalmist, have been wounded by love, you bear in your heart the burden of being alive, of being human in a dehumanizing world. And the sacrament at the altar, the body and blood of Jesus, is now ours to bear and to consume with eager and listening hearts; The glorious sacrament—it is the pledge that God in Christ will bear us and bear with us as we cry and dance, wail and sing our way to the throne of his merciful grace. IN the name...

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