

**Let Us Worship, and Let Us Learn To Love**  
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**February 15, 2009**

My parents are remarkably unsentimental about love. I have never known them to celebrate Valentine's Day. They celebrate their anniversary every year, but usually quietly except when they hit a big milestone. Their entire wedding and honeymoon cost just \$500.

But the best story which illustrates my parents' rebellion against our culture's rules about love is the story of their decision to get married. Our culture dictates there should be some sweepingly romantic evening with some dramatic proposal of marriage. According to the strictest rules in this playbook, it should have been my father who planned and carried this out. Instead, their engagement happened like this. One of them said to the other, "So you think we should get married?" The other replied, "Yeah, okay." When I was a kid, the part of this story that scandalized me the most was that they can't remember which one of them said which line in that conversation. Not only was their engagement entered into with so little fanfare, but they can't even tell you which one of them proposed!

Despite this very countercultural environment, I turned into a helpless romantic. I think it has something to do with all the movies of musicals I watched as a kid. My mom loves Broadway musicals, so when we rented movies, that's what we got. Well, I think an impressionable young mind can only be exposed to songs like "Some Enchanted Evening" and story lines like the romance of "West Side Story" for so long before you believe that's really how love works. Despite my parents' very real and very true love story, I chose to believe the myth.

I want to take a moment to look at this myth, a myth that is so incredibly ingrained in our culture. From Cinderella to Some Enchanted Evening. From the commercials for diamond rings to the plot of nearly every romantic comedy, this myth surrounds us on all sides. It goes something like this.

Each of us as a single person is incomplete. To be complete, we need to meet our perfect other half. There exists in the world only one other person who will fill that void and make us whole. Our job is to search until we find that other person. When we encounter them, we will know immediately that they are our soul mate, our perfect other half. Our only job is to find that person and make sure we hold onto them. Depending on what genre we're in, there may be some misunderstandings along the way here. But in the end, true love will triumph. We will know it has when the story ends with some dramatic proposal of marriage and some extraordinarily ornate wedding. After that, well, the screen fades to black with the implication of some vague "happily ever after." Or, if this is a tragedy, one or the other or both of the lovers will be killed before the happy ending.

In calling this story a myth, I mean two different and perhaps apparently contradictory things. First of all, I mean that it isn't true. Love doesn't really work this way. There are

some deep flaws in this story. But I also mean that it represents our culture's way of expressing something that is true. Something deep and mysterious, something we try to get at by telling stories.

To me, there are two really dangerous lies in this myth. The first is that real, true love will be instantly recognizable and will last forever without effort. This is an easy lie to tell when the stories all end so soon after they start. Take *West Side Story* for example. For anyone who's never seen it or has forgotten, *West Side Story* is a musical retelling of the *Romeo and Juliet* story. Our Romeo is Tony, the founder of a gang of white New Yorkers called the Jets. Our Juliet is Maria, the sister of the head of a rival gang known as the Sharks. The Sharks are all recent immigrants to New York from Puerto Rico. So, in addition to turf wars there is a great deal of racism in the gang rivalry. Tony and Maria see each other across the room at a dance and fall in love. The following afternoon, they pretend to get married, and promise each other, "even death can't part us now." Of course, since this is a *Romeo and Juliet* story, Tony is killed by a member of the Sharks. Maria survives absent her beloved.

Well, of course there's no strife in their relationship! It ends in death about 24 hours after they met. We never see the long-term challenges. We never see them struggle with the ordinary difficulties of love, the small annoyances, the discussions about where to go for holidays, the little differences of taste or opinion with which every couple must contend. We don't see them struggle either with the deeper issues you know would be present in this relationship. There is no mention of misunderstandings in a relationship with two different native languages. There's no mention of Tony struggling to overcome the racism that so pervades his culture and must surely have crept into his own consciousness. There's no mention of Maria struggling with her ability to trust a man from the dominant culture. Oh yeah, and we only see a very short and incomplete struggle with the fact that Tony killed Maria's beloved older brother. You know that one would come back to haunt them!

In reality, when we fall in love, we have all kinds of things that will crop up to make life difficult. Every relationship is a negotiation. Every relationship raises ways we've been hurt before, and although that means that love can be deeply healing, it also means it's hard. It takes work. It's not easy sailing.

This lie of immediate love that lasts forever without work is harmful in two ways. In couples that are good together, where love is life-giving and healing, this lie makes people afraid when we hit conflict. Love is supposed to be perfect and not contentious. So, if we are fighting or disagreeing or even feeling a little separate, something must be horribly wrong.

On the other hand, this lie can also make us hold onto relationships that are not life-giving. Love never ends, we've been told. Once we've fallen in love, that's it. We can promise each other eternity from the moment we meet. Less than 24 hours after that mythic beginning, "even death won't part us now." Promises like that can make it hard to see the truth that it is time to let go.

The other, even more dangerous lie in the myth is its very first premise. Each of us is incomplete alone. We need someone else to make us whole. This one is incredibly insidious. We are not supposed to be whole. We are supposed to need another person desperately. We can be completed by another human being. If something inside us feels unfulfilled, we must search out our soul-mate.

Again, this lie can pull in two directions. It can make us enter into or stay in harmful relationships because we feel like we are not complete in ourselves. It can also unnecessarily stress healthy relationships when, even though we're partnered, we are still missing something in our lives.

So much for the lies. But I also told you there is something in this myth of the true. And here is the truth I think this story is trying to get at. This myth talks about love as something that is both disruptive and potentially eternal, something that turns our lives upside down but also makes us whole. This story hints at the elements of the Divine. This myth says, around the edges and imperfectly, love at its best is Divine. Love is like God. Love comes when you least expect it, and nothing is ever the same.

We read this morning two passages from the New Testament which also link love and God. John tells us that love is God, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Paul tells us what a community will look like if the Spirit in the form of love dwells in the community. Both authors tell us of a deep truth. Love, true love, real love is of God. In fact, it may not be an exaggeration to say that God is Love.

What does it mean to say that love is of God? What is the mark of the sacred, the holy that we can see in love as in other encounters with the Divine?

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

This is a pretty good description of one persistent image of God. The love of God the loving parent is patient and kind. It is not harmful. It is not irritable. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. This is the God of the parable of the prodigal son. The love of the father for the son is patient and kind. This love lasts unaltered even when the son has broken every rule of the faith as well as family loyalty and squandered years and a fortune in sinful living. When this son comes home expecting anger and punishment, the loving father runs out to meet him, embracing him and welcoming him back into the family with a big party.

I have encountered Divinity in this form. In patience and kindness. In comfort. In forgiveness and unconditional love. In love which is a homecoming, a recognition, a moment on a parent's lap. This is, to me, a true image of God and a true description of love.

We human beings are not perfect, and we don't love perfectly. Still, we can come pretty close to this kind of love. When we are patient with the ways our children or partners stumble. When our hearts are wide and open enough to forgive a wrong done to us by one we love. When we can be the embrace that the wanderer returns home to. When we can be lifted out of ourselves in care for another. When doing so makes us the best people we can be. This is sacred love.

This passage from 1 Corinthians and the other sacred writings which call us to this kind of embracing, forgiving, unconditional love give us a vision, something to work for. They can inspire and call forth that kind of love, allow us to see it, lift it up as holy. We can learn from these teachers how to better love those around us. Self-sacrificing love, unconditional love, forgiving, embracing, patient and enduring love has done wondrous things for our world.

Because love can be this comforting, safe, homecoming, I believe our culture makes a mistake sometimes in thinking that love is tame. It is cute. It is easy. Flowers and teddy bears. We've just passed the highest holiday of this vision of love. Valentine's Day is all about invoking love as a sweet, cute, tame force in the world. A force that can be easily captured in the rhyming verses in Hallmark greeting cards.

But if God can be the loving and comforting parent, that is not the only true face of God. Annie Dillard talks about this in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. She says,

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does any-one have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.<sup>1</sup>

She's talking about God, of course, but she could just as easily be talking about love. Cupid's arrow has become a greeting card cartoon. But if Love is of God, then it is also unbelievably wild. Love, like God can also draw us out to where we can never return. Love, like God is not a force to be invoked blithely. Love, like God can come as a force that tears down everything we thought we knew. Love, like God can shake the ground under us, can rearrange our lives on a moment's notice, can turn us upside down and shake us and leave us forever changed.

Carrie Newcomer sees love with the same respect for its real and disrupting power that Annie Dillard sees in God. On her album, "A Gathering of Spirits," is a song called

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), p.52-53.

“Little Earthquakes.” The chorus goes, “Hold on as the very ground beneath us starts to shiver and shake. When you love as hard as this, there’s bound to be some trembling, some risk, some mistakes, something lost and something gained, and little earthquakes.” She calls “love wild and deep and elemental, as right as rain and thunder that rolls across the ground, that can shake you for a moment and bring the walls on down.”<sup>2</sup>

I have also experienced both God and love this way, as forces that can come sweeping and leave everything changed. Throughout the ages, human beings have tried to tie down this incredibly disruptive force. It has, at various times, been asserted that love can only exist between members of the same socioeconomic background, that love can only exist between members of the same race, and that love can only exist between members of opposite sexes. The list of the bonds we have tried to put on love is long.

And love the earthquake goes on breaking through every one of these artificial barriers. The first time I fell in love was like that. I was 16. I fell in love with my best friend who was also a girl. Well, that shook my whole universe. This was not love as cute and easy. This was not flowers and teddy bears. This was earth-shattering, terrifying revelation.

When I went to college, I fell in love again, this time with a woman who lived on my floor. After some persistent effort on my part, we started dating. Within a couple weeks we were talking about forever. Within a couple of months, I was convinced that I would be in love with her not just for my whole life but for eternity as well.

We were together for almost 6 years. My partner was a master of the grand gesture, the marks our culture tells us to look for as the marks of true love. Elaborate gifts on Valentine’s Day and our anniversary. Grand gestures the first time she told me she loved me, and the picture perfect wedding proposal.

After I graduated from college, we spent a year together in Ireland before moving into an apartment on the campus of my seminary. By this time, there were some significant fault lines the pretty picture. My partner was controlling and manipulative. She was also simultaneously putting a lot of energy into another relationship.

But true love endures all things, right? True love never ends. I had promised not to leave her, and I don’t break my promises. I was hurting but leaving was just outside the realm of possibility for the longest time.

So the second time God the earthquake showed up, it was to teach me to love myself. God became a strong, disrupting force. God became anger because I needed to learn to feel anger. God became the force inside myself that finally learned to stand up for myself. God became the force inside me that finally made me strong enough to break all those promises, to break my own expectations and what I believed was expected of me. God came in to make me strong enough to break my engagement, to get away and start over.

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<sup>2</sup> Carrie Newcomer, “Little Earthquakes,” from *The Gathering of Spirits* (Philo: 2002).

The ideal of love as self-sacrifice, the ideal of love that endures all things has a serious shadow side. The message that true love endures all things has, across centuries been one of the bars in the cage that keeps people with partners who abuse them, emotionally and physically. The idea that unconditional love will always forgive and forget keeps people in relationships that do incredible harm to their minds, hearts, bodies, and souls. As much as there is that of God in this ideal in some situations, God can also be the force that sweeps in to liberate us from the ways this ideal can kill.

Love, like God can come with fire and wind, with raging rivers and quaking ground. Love can disrupt us and turn us upside down. Our world will shake when we let real love in, whether that be love for ourselves or love for other people.

Do we have any idea of the strength of the force we so blithely invoke? Do we have any idea how ridiculous are our ideas of taming, subduing, boxing in God?

What does it mean to say that love is from God? It means it may be patient and comfortable. It means it may show up as forgiveness where you didn't think it was possible. It means it may truly endure hardship and struggle and never end.

It also means that love can come in when we least expect it. It means it might turn all our ideas of it upside down and leave us scared and confused. It means that it might shake the very ground beneath our feet.

To me, above all, what it means to say that love is from God is to say that love is life-giving. True love, sacred love, love that bears the mark of the Divine is love that heals, love that makes us more whole, love that leaves more life in its wake. If a relationship is producing more restricted life, if a relationship is killing one's soul, if a relationship is creating more wounds than it is healing, that is not of God. That is not love.

Even when it's scary and resembles an earthquake, real love is life-giving. Real love for children, for partners, or for ourselves makes us better people. Real love heals wounds. Real love shakes us to our core and leaves us forever changed, but in ways that make us more alive, more authentic, more open to the world, more genuinely happy and fulfilled.

Annie Dillard goes on in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

The eighteenth century Hasidic Jews had more sense.... [One] Hasid, a Rabbi refused to promise a friend to meet him the next day: "How can you ask me to make such a promise? This evening, I must pray 'Hear, O Israel.' When I say these words, my soul goes out to the utmost rim of life...Perhaps I shall not die this time either, but how can I now promise to do something at a time after prayer?"<sup>3</sup>

Real love, like God is a mystery. How can we promise that we will be the same after we've gone through that fire?

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<sup>3</sup> Dillard, p.53

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