

FOREWARD BY DAVID FITCH, AUTHOR OF THE END OF EVANGELICALISM

DO NOT SEEK REVENGE OR BEAR
A GRUDGE AGAINST ANYONE
AMONG YOUR PEOPLE, BUT **LOVE**
YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.
YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS
SAID, **LOVE** YOUR NEIGHBOR AND
HATE YOUR ENEMY. BUT I TELL
YOU, **LOVE** YOUR ENEMIES AND

THE PRACTICE OF LOVE

REAL STORIES OF LIVING INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

PRAY FOR THOSE WHO
PERSECUTE YOU THAT YOU MAY
BE CHILDREN OF YOUR FATHER IN
HEAVEN. **LOVE** THE LORD YOUR
GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND
WITH ALL YOUR SOUL AND WITH
ALL YOUR STRENGTH AND WITH
ALL YOUR MIND AND, **LOVE** YOUR
NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.

EDITED BY JONATHAN BRINK

The Practice of Love

Real Stories of Living Into the Kingdom of God

Edited by Jonathan Brink

CivitasPress

You've got a book. We've got a plan.sm

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Foreword

by David Fitch

Like the word “justice,” the word “love” is a much-disputed term in our society. It can mean many things to many people. There is of course the most familiar love—romantic love—which fills so much of America’s cultural imagination. There are the loves of family, of friends, and the love we share towards those who hurt whenever tragedy strikes around the world. Swedish theologian Anders Nygren famously argued for three kinds of love in the New Testament: the love of *Eros* or the desire for union, the love of *phileo* or the love of friendship and the love of *agape*, the unconditional selfless love that we all should seek to emulate. The love we all should aspire to, according to Nygren, is *agape*. *Agape* love was the staple for many sermons growing up in church. Yet even this love has become disputed in our day. Some claim that *agape* love is too passionless to accurately describe the love that comes from God. As I said, the word “love” is a much-disputed term in our society.

There is nothing more dangerous than a love ethic undefined. Anyone who has been a parent knows that to simply affirm their children or give them what they want is not sufficient to truly love them. Indeed, this could do them more harm than good. It is difficult to describe what it means to truly love a child. Likewise, when I find myself embroiled in tough situations with people whom God calls me to love: my neighbor down the street, the poor person at the train depot, the bothered church member I am in community with, the

person sitting in judgment of me, I need some help to understand the love that God is calling me to. I need some definition! God's love is central to the gospel. The central call of Christ on our lives, what theologian Scot McKnight calls the *Jesus Creed*, is to love God and love my neighbor as myself. His love is at the heart of what God did in Christ to save the world. Yet faced with real encounters with people in conflict or dis-ease, I need to know what it might mean to love in the way Jesus asks me to love.

Jesus famously said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13). His words are demanding. They seem to be so against what we have come to know as "self-love" and "self-care" in our day. And so his words can be easily dismissed as impractical, another impossible demand. This is why I am convinced we need to see this love demonstrated. It is not enough to describe conceptually how God's love differs from the various versions of love and self-love our society is comfortable with. In order to really understand it we need stories. The love of Christ requires performances, people actually experiencing it and telling us what it looks like. We can then go out and practice something similar in the Spirit, entering into the practice of God's love.

What follows in this book is a wonderful variety of stories shared by people who have experienced love and/or shared love. Each story helps us get a peek at what God's love might look like. It is a way of describing the reality of God's love so that we might enter into it ourselves if we so choose. And this is the whole point, for I'm convinced more than ever that God's love is a practice which we must enter into in the Spirit, in submission to Christ's Lordship over our lives. Only by entering into it can we get past the insurmountable barriers and actually open ourselves to being his vessels for the saving love of God in Christ for the world. Only by practicing it can we imagine what it might be to love others in God's love in the way God has already loved us. Good stories of God's love at work in people's lives can help us do this!

Recently after our church gathering, a man approached me with anger. It was a familiar story. He often misinterprets things others and I have said in the church from the front. I felt the urge to defend and lash out. The one thing that saved me was the vigorous discipling of me by my community to learn how to see him with love and seek his good in Christ. Likewise, in the McDonald's I hang out in almost every morning, a homeless guy was rustling the feathers of many of the regulars there. I would have been tempted to ostracize this man, as well, but for the practice my community has put me through to see the love of God at work in the world and to join in. In each case, I was able to overcome real socio-physical-psychological barriers to loving people, to giving up of myself to love them and to really be set free to immerse myself in the love of God for the world. All because of a community of people who disciple me daily through their stories, practices, questions and daily living.

Maybe this book can be a discipling community of sorts for the training of all of us into sharing more of God's love in the world. I don't mean to imply every story here is an example of God's love in all its purity. What I would suggest, however, is that these stories can open our imaginations to understanding more fully the call of God to share His love in the world in a determinative way that deeply impacts our world. Read these stories. Be inspired and, most importantly, be blessed as you share God's love out of God's love for you.

Preface

by Jonathan Brink

“Come follow me.”

These three simple words have arrested people’s attention for centuries. A poor Jewish immigrant, living in the midst of one of the greatest empires in history, arrived on the scene and suggested a simple way of living that transformed everything. He suggested that an entire religious system could be reduced to practicing love.

This idea is a rather provocative thought. While we spend the majority of our time on the content and practice of belief, and belief was an important idea in the kingdom of God, it was love that framed the practices behind following Jesus. To believe allowed one to see the Kingdom at work. To love allowed one to experience the Kingdom of God at work.

The Practice of Love, Real Stories of Living Into The Kingdom Of God was born out of a simple idea. What would it look like practically to take Jesus up on his words and to put into practice the command to love, and what would it mean to share those stories? The only qualification for participating was that each writer be honest, open and human.

The Practice of Love explores four distinct categories: loving God, loving the self, loving our neighbor, and loving our enemy. Each category allows individuals to wrestle through what this means in

their lives. Although the command to love our enemy is the first command to love in the Gospels, I chose to stick with the traditional progression we often assume. Yet what surprised me is that loving God is not actually easier for people. Much like loving the self, a neighbor, and even the enemy, loving God often comes after we learn to love ourselves.

I have also not defined the parameters for what love means for each writer, allowing each person to come to their own terms. But what is interesting is how similar their definitions are. To engage love is to seek out the intrinsic value of each relationship. It assumes an inherent value that transcends and is undefined by circumstances.

The reality is that practicing love is not easy. To practice love often means wrestling with our own fears, needs and hidden wounds. It calls us to do the impossible, often for the sake of our own restoration. Love calls us into confrontation with some of the darker realities of life, especially in loving our enemy.

It's often counter-intuitive to the present situation. Engaging love is often the last thing that seems correct, or right. But it is engaging love, in spite of the evidence, that the hidden value of love is revealed. The more we step into it, the more we discover the upside-down quality of the kingdom of God.

As you will see, the stories share a raw quality of what it means to be human. I have chosen not to edit for language and content so as to preserve the authors' real emotional experience. Some of the experiences step outside of traditional lines, in much the same way as Jesus stepping out of traditional lines by speaking to the woman at the well did, or by healing on the Sabbath.

I asked each writer to share three things: the cost and the value of practicing love, and what each person learned through the experience. The cost was what they had to give up to engage in love and the value was what they gained by doing so. What each person learned is both remarkable and practical. Love doesn't always give us what we want, but it does give us what we need.

The hope of this project is to inspire you, the reader, to step into the footsteps of Jesus and engage in a very real practice of love, and to do so on a regular, even moment-by-moment basis. To practice love is to follow in a way that allows us to experience the kingdom of God in our midst. And when we do, we begin to develop a story that echoes the reason people actually followed Jesus in the first place.

Loving God

*Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." **Matthew 22:37***

What does it mean to love God? Does God actually need our love? Is there some magical quality to it that transforms our understanding of God? And equally important, why love God? Is loving God part of the natural order of the universe? Is loving God a condition of grace or salvation? Does God only love us when we love God first? And will God love us back when we choose to love? These are the questions that characterize the journey into loving God.

Much ink (and blood) has been spilled since the dawn of time to develop a reasoned theological treatise for loving God. The easiest starting point is the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, which command us to. It's part of the Torah and the Bible. Loving God was a central part of what it meant to be a Jew and eventually a Christian. Countless individuals have spent lifetimes wrestling with the command.

The command to love God seems pre-written with a kind of "have to" quality. It's easy to see the command as something God demands, as opposed to an invitation to life. The assumption we can easily make is that if we don't, God is going to be pissed. But it's not a demand. It's a command that invites us into discovery. We are free to ignore it, as many do at our own risk, but we are also free to engage in it with vigor, passion and humility.

The practical reasons for engaging in love for God are easily missed. Neuroscience is discovering that our approach to God deeply shapes our biological responses. It is also discovering that it's good for our health. Prayer and meditative contemplation have profound physical implications. Loving God invites us into service, compassion and humility, which are deeply important to social interaction.

The assumption we are making in these stories is much more in line with, "We get to." These aren't theological treatises for the reasons to love God. They are instead stories of what happens when we do. It's easy to focus on the logic, when loving God is often totally illogical. Stories take a different path, inviting us into the experience and leaving it at that. It just is. We're left wondering, pondering, and wrestling with the deeper meaning of the legitimacy of our experience. Is it suggesting something true?

To love God has intrinsic and often personally rewarding value, beyond the historic trappings of organized religion. In fact, loving God seems to transcend religion. Experience is sometimes our best teacher. We can search for a logical and even illogical reason for loving God, but stepping into the practice can be just as rewarding. While logic is often extrinsically developed and supported, experience produces an intrinsic reward all its own. It gives us a personal, tangible reality that is hard to ignore. It's resonates in a way that logic can't.

These stories also begin with an embedded assumption: in loving God, each person is assuming God is also there. The stories don't presume to convince anyone of the existence of God. To love God is to see God, and to know God, but we can't gain that experience until we step into the possibility. Each person is trusted with the responsibility to work out what it means.

Loving God doesn't mean everything turns out just perfect. It's not a magic pill that promises to provide happiness. Just the opposite is often true. The moment we intentionally step into loving God

is often the moment we encounter circumstances that directly challenge the idea of God's goodness. It's as if we learn what loving God means in the face of direct challenge.

Venture forth with us as we explore stories of people engaging what it means to love God. In this section you'll hear from Lori, as she steps out of her comfort zone and is surprised by God in an unusual way. You will hear Jason wrestle with the depth and cost of what it means to love God. You'll hear Alise ponder what it means to continue to love God even when her husband has chosen another path.

You'll also hear Anna's journey of rediscovering a God she hardly knew existed. You'll hear from Phil as he contemplates how pain can speak into our lives in ways we never expected. You'll hear Raelene brave through the conflict of what it means to hold onto love in moments of injustice. You'll hear from Marian as she seeks a closer relationship with God. And finally, you'll hear from Kathy as she contemplates loving God by making the invisible visible.

1

Looking to Love God

by Lori Wilson

I've been in Phoenix for three glorious sun-drenched days, and my final indulgence before I return to the sub-zero temperatures of my Michigan home is an outdoor dinner at In-N-Out. These burgers and fries are a rare delicacy, one I enjoy only once or twice a decade, and I can hardly wait. I've brought a book to accompany me as I savor this treat, and I've chosen a table overlooking the fiery glow of a desert sunset.

As I take my first bite of long-awaited burger, a man with scraggly teeth, greasy hair, and very smelly clothes saunters by, asking each of us in turn if we have a cigarette to spare. I tell him I'm sorry, and then, almost as an afterthought, call after him, "They're really no good for you, anyhow!" He gives me a confused grin, and shuffles off to dig through the trashcan for an unfinished butt.

Just a few minutes later, he walks back triumphantly to show me the cigarette he's retrieved, and stands just a few feet off, happy to share his second-hand smoke with me. When the table next to me vacates, he takes a seat there with an apologetic, "I don't mean to bother you." Clearly, he does.

So now, what do I do? I'm a bit unsettled; as a woman, travelling

alone, I know to be on my guard, particularly around unstable sorts of folks. Of course, there are crowds around, enjoying their burgers and milkshakes; so really, I'm probably quite safe. Nevertheless, this is well beyond my comfort zone. Not only is he breaking countless social rules by talking to a stranger and smoking on a restaurant patio, he's interrupting my solitary date with a good book. Occasionally, a restaurant employee walks past and I half hope they'll ask this guy to leave. But as I work to sort all this out, a very clear voice in my head asks just how far I am willing to go to love God.

Just a few months ago—in fact, on my last conference trip away from home—I was challenged by a story told by Colin Greene, an Irish theologian and scholar. He, along with two other speakers, had spent three days inviting those of us in the audience to evaluate our theology in light of the developments of our post-colonial world. Their words were convicting, challenging, scathing and simultaneously encouraging. In the context of a relatively involved theological and philosophical engagement, Colin related to us the time he joined a friend on a visit to an Orthodox church. Amidst readings in Latin and much swinging of incense, the priest turned to the congregation and took a deep bow. The congregation bowed in response. Colin leaned to his friend to ask what all this bowing was about; his friend answered simply, "He is bowing to the image of God in us."

I was struck deeply by this story; while many things were said during those days that instructed and provoked me, I think perhaps it is this story that has gained the most traction in my life. I think this is so for at least two reasons. First, it reflects a remarkable truth. In the story we have of creation, God called most things into being using simply words: stars, sun, trees, fish. When it came to humans, however, God's hands got dirty. God took earth, God breathed, God brought life. All of this was an outpouring of the original words, "Let us make man[kind] in our own image." All this effort God went to was to give a body, a human form, to God's own image. Astonishing, if you really stop to think about it.

To be sure, we humans have done a remarkable job of tarnishing that image. Starting with Adam and Eve, and right on down to myself today, we've hidden the majesty of that original creation. We behave in ways that are selfish, that gravitate around us and our own interests, that crowd out our ability to see (or reveal) that God-given image. We so often choose to live in our own brokenness and shadows; we refuse to do the hard work of digging deep to find that original image, and to live in ways that faithfully reflect it.

But interestingly enough, it would seem that the image of God survives intact. As we follow the story of the Bible, there is in fact no account of God withdrawing the image with which we were created. That we fall short of it, there is no doubt. But that we lose it, never. So the action of that priest was a reverent recognition of the presence of God in that sanctuary, not simply in a mystical, ethereal way, but uniquely in the concrete human beings that stood before him. He did not for a moment conflate the congregation with God, but simply honored them as bearers of the image of the God whom he worships.

I was struck to the core by the challenge to live with such reverence. For of course, it is not only a congregation in one small church that bears the image of God. Each one of us, almost six billion of us alive today, have been given that magnificent gift, the unspeakable treasure of our creation. If I were to truly see this—to look deeply in the eyes of each person I encounter for the reflection of God—I believe my engagement with humanity would be irrevocably changed. There is so much I can see in a minute glance, so many conclusions I can draw without even trying. But what if I have to look deeper, try harder, pour my effort into discerning the unique reflection of the image of God? How differently might I treat others if my very first assumption related to their core identity, and not to the multitude of distracting characteristics and behaviors they exhibit?

The second reason this story has put down such roots is that it demands constant, unremitting practice. Later that same day, my

inspired enthusiasm was put to its first test. As I traveled through the airport on my way home, I found myself following a middle-aged gentleman in fatigues. It was clear from his posture and decorations that he was a lifelong member of the U.S. military. Here I must be honest: I get a knot in my throat around military folks. I grieve so deeply their own losses, and I grieve the reality that our world is not a peaceful place. I am brought to my knees by the human propensity for violence, and by the reality that our country supports such a massive industry built on this inclination.

As I stood near this man, I was reminded that he, too—for all the emotional turmoil he represented to me—bears the image of God. My face flushed instantly; my palms began to sweat. There were any number of emotional responses I was ready to offer at that point; reverence was not one of them. But I heard that question: “How far are you willing to go to love God?” And I ever-so-subtly, with an odd mix of reticent conviction, bowed my head towards the image of God in camo.

God’s image, of course, continues to surround me. My children, my husband, my neighbors and friends ... most of the time, the invitation to look for the image of God in them is an inspiring and rewarding one. I *want* to see God reflected in the ones I love. I’m happy to look for it and to find it, to nurture it and draw it out. I love them, and I love God’s reflection in them.

But there are those other times. Walking around downtown Phoenix the past couple days, for instance. Amidst the concertgoers and diners-out, homeless men wander and shuffle through town. They sit in doorways and dig through trashcans. They make me awkward and uncomfortable, and then I am reminded of Mother Theresa’s line: “Jesus in his distressing disguise.” And I challenge myself to make eye contact, to offer a simple “good morning” as we cross paths. Some respond in kind, others stare straight ahead, some smile in return. And I wonder about the image of God; why have they hidden it so deeply? Why do some still seem to bear it almost visibly in their eyes? Why do others look as if they’ve never known it? I plead on

their behalf to God that somehow, someday, they might know the majesty and the wonder of it, that they, too, were given an identity rooted in the Creator.

Which brings me back to Chris. Once he's moved himself over to my table, and is watching me eat my fries, he introduces himself, tells me about being from South Jersey. He asks me about my new year (even though it's nearly March) and tells me about the bars he crashed to ring it in. He won't stay at the local shelter because they make their guests go to classes all day. He hopes the two blankets he stashed are still there when he gets back to them, because the desert gets cold at night. He thanks me for my smile, tells me, "It made my new year."

And I sit and listen and anguish inside. This is painfully awkward and just a little bit scary. Long gone are the days when I thought a sympathetic ear could change a life. I harbor no illusions that I'm offering this man anything more than a friendly smile and a bench to sit for a bit.

Back in the days when I thought I could change the world, I also had a good handle on how to love God. Those two things went together, really. Journal entries galore remind me of those heady, confident, hopeful days. The certainty and assurance were beautiful, and I don't doubt that God's image shone through in wonderful ways. But life's ups and downs, disappointments and failures, have brought me to a different place. I live more tentatively, much more aware of grief and tragedy and God's image obscured. I experience fear sometimes, and I wonder what to do with it. I don't think that much of my Sunday morning go-to-meetin' routine does a whole lot in terms of communicating love to God. I wonder, in fact, just what "loving God" exactly is.

Until I look across the table at Chris, and I realize that if I truly see the image of God in him, I will rush to prepare him a banquet. As it turns out, for now, the most I can muster is a milkshake. Chocolate is his favorite, he tells me, and so I step inside to get him one. When

I return with the shake, he's compulsively picking lint off his jacket, but he looks up with a smile to thank me. I shift things around to shake his hand, and tell him good-bye. He wistfully tells me he hopes to see me again, and thanks me again for my smile.

It's awkward, not at all triumphant or even particularly rewarding. But I know that I have chosen to love the image of God in Chris. I have shaken the hand of Jesus in his distressing disguise. And I'm going to have to do it again. And again and again, for the rest of my life. I hope it gets easier; I hope I can get past the smells and the images that distort the image of God. I hope I get less fearful, that I develop wisdom to know how to best honor that image. I imagine it won't always mean buying someone a milkshake – it's possible that sometimes it will even mean walking away. I hope I can learn to tell the difference. But I hope that every time I hear that question: "How far are you willing to go to love Me?" I can answer, "As far as I need to go to honor Your image."

3

Space to Find Him

by Alise Wright

"I just don't buy it anymore."

I heard those words coming out of my husband's mouth and saw the sincerity on his face, but I couldn't believe it.

The "it" that my husband didn't buy anymore was the existence of God.

I knew that my husband had been struggling with his relationship with the Church for a while. We had gone through a number of painful experiences with different local churches, ranging from harmful teachings from an obvious con artist to straight-up rejection from another. Being liberal Democrats who accept evolution, it was easy to feel on the outside in our conservative, evangelical Christian circle. His struggle and mine were very similar.

But how could his problems lead to this? He had been the president of his school's Bible club. He went to Bible College to study to be a music minister. He was the one with the strong faith. He was the rock. So how did frustrations with the Church turn into a rejection of God? And how could a loving God, a God who promised that "nothing could separate us" from His love, allow this to happen?

In the days following my husband's confession, my emotions bounced around constantly. One minute I was sure everything would be fine. We had been through difficult times before and this was just another thing to work through. I'm a progressive, tolerant woman. We could totally roll with this change.

In another moment, I was terrified. Why would someone who didn't believe in any god want to stay with someone who did? Don't all atheists think that all people of faith are stupid? What would the people at church say when they found out that my husband was an unbeliever? What would our families say about this? Fear of rejection reared up and threatened to crush me.

I had bouts of sadness. I was sad that the faith that we had shared for our entire relationship was no longer something that we had in common. I was sad that he had felt like he had to hide his true feelings from me for so long.

And oh, I was angry. Angry at my husband for turning his back on our beliefs, on our shared history, on God. Angry at myself for not seeing the signs and doing more to stop it. Angry at the Church for causing so much pain in my husband's life and making him turn away. Angry at God for letting one of his precious children slip through his fingers.

In the first days of my husband's announcement, all of these emotions swirled in my brain. And in the midst of that, I frequently neglected the one thing that could have made that transition a bit more gracious for both of us.

Namely, I forgot about love. And I nearly forgot about the One who IS Love.

My fears, my sadness, my anger: these things had a legitimate place in this revelation if for no other reason than they were the emotions that accompanied the event. To deny them would be to deny what makes me human, what makes me unique.

But those emotions threatened to become the definition of the

moment. The definition of me.

In those early days, I said some things that I wish I could take back. Words that were born out of an emotional response to something that I didn't fully understand, that I didn't want and that I didn't like. And don't even get me started about the things I didn't say. Yikes. My brain was a pretty scary place in those first days.

At some point, I had a mini-breakdown. My emotions swept over me and I just let loose. And in that moment, my husband took me in his arms and whispered assurances that he loved me.

For all of the things that changed, that had not. We still shared a wacky sense of humor. We still shared parenting our four beautiful children. We still shared the same sense of right and wrong. When I stepped back and remembered these things, I was able to move beyond things that I felt into the realm of things that I knew.

But off in the wings was Someone who didn't seem as accessible as my husband. Who I felt had really let me down. Someone who I believed had promised certain things and had simply not delivered. Or worse, was just a figment of my imagination.

His arms didn't encompass me. He didn't whisper in my ear. I felt alone and abandoned.

The thing I've noticed about God is that He's not pushy. He gives me space to find Him. He wants to be pursued, oh my does He ever. And when He sees us, even off in the distance, making our way toward Him, he will come toward us at a flat-out run. He wants to lavish love on us and He has in extravagant ways, but He also wants us to acknowledge Him.

And for a while, I didn't want to do that. I wanted Him to do all the work. I wanted Him to prove to me that He was worth my love.

I think I often mistake emotions for love. They are certainly a part of it. There's an excitement that I feel when my husband tells me that he loves me. There's a pride that wells up when I'm thinking about my kids. There's gladness in my heart when I'm spending time with

good friends. These are all people that I love and these feelings are a part of that love. But they're not the whole thing.

I know that my husband loves me because of the choices that he has made for our family and because of little, seemingly mundane things that he does for me to show me that he appreciates me. I know that my kids love me because of the snuggles they share with me, and how they want to involve me in the things that are important to them. I know that my friends love me because they'll sit on the phone and listen to me whine about my life, even if they've got stuff going on that might be a bit more pressing. These aren't just feelings that come and go, these are real, tangible ways that people show me love.

And I can know that God loves me because 2,000 years ago, He sent His Son to live here on the earth. He gave up the beauty and glory of Heaven to hang out with a bunch of smelly, dirty fishermen. To eat dinner with tax collectors. To sit at a well and talk with a Samaritan woman. To be betrayed by one of his best friends. To be mocked, beaten, spat upon and killed.

This was not something He was obligated to do. This was certainly not something He felt like doing. But because He loves me, because He loves you, He chose to do this.

That choice to love is one that I can accept. I can choose to love the people who I believe contributed to my husband's deconversion. I can choose to love people who are different from me. I can choose to love people who make my life difficult. I can choose to love my husband, even as we travel our different faith journeys.

I can choose to love God, even when He seems distant. And I find that as soon as I make that choice, I can see Him off in the horizon, making his way toward me.

Loving the Self

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22:39

As we turn to the next section, we come to a strange tension. Jesus commanded his followers to love our neighbors, but he placed the emphasis or comparison not on our love for God, but on how we love ourselves. In other words, Jesus was beginning with a radical notion of inclusivity. And it can be argued that he was suggesting we couldn't love our neighbors effectively until we come to terms with loving the self.

The idea of loving self is often directly correlated with pride. We hear the conflict directly in Jesus' other commands to “take up the cross and deny the self,” and wonder, “which is it, Jesus?” And in its wake, we often defer to the total exclusion of the self, which can cripple us as individuals.

An underlying thread of despair arises when we lose site of the value of the self. Why love that which is unlovable? Some of the stories share the self-destruction that commonly occurs when we loathe the self. A deep level of anger and pain occurs that just can't be contained.

The truth is we don't live with our neighbors 24/7. We live with the self, and no matter how far we attempt to run, our shadows follow our every step. Loving the self then is deeply important to following in the footsteps of Jesus because it becomes a way we participate with God in the restoration of the world. To restore the self is to

participate with God in our little corner.

The common thread throughout these stories is the issue of trauma and tragedy. Something happens that fundamentally changes our capacity to see the God image within. It seems that as human beings created in the image of God, we hold a profound capacity to get it wrong, to construct and see a false self, one that hides the natural beauty and elegance of what God has created. The false self is often a manifestation of that same capacity to create. We assume that God can't love us because "that" happened. We assume the other can't love us because some circumstance completely shattered our capacity to reflect the image of God. We allow circumstance to define our identity.

The deeper work in loving the self is found in seeing what God sees. Loving the self is not then about pride, but in restoring the image of God in the self, to see the beauty, the worth, and the value that intrinsically resides in the self.

A second common thread is how much community plays a part in restoring the self. The more we isolate ourselves, which seems to magnify the worst of our imagination, the darker the despair. But the more we surround ourselves with those that can see beyond our brokenness, the more we are restored. Community plays a central role in overcoming the lies and the false self.

Continue with us as we explore stories of people engaging what it means to love the self. In this section, you'll hear from Kara as she fights through the deep wounds of a traumatic relationship. You'll hear from Arthur as he wrestles with a profound level of self-loathing that arises from adultery. You'll hear from Idelette as she traverses the world in search of her feminine image. You'll hear from Kathy as she learns to embrace the inherent paradox of loving the self in the midst of brokenness. You'll hear from Mihee as she examines the tension of inherited and constructed identities. You'll hear from Todd as he contemplates his own worth.

You'll also hear from Rhonda as she confronts a deep wound of

sexual trauma, and what it means to overcome. You'll hear from Trygve as he confronts his own deep-seated anger and pride, when life grabs him by the throat. You'll hear from Neal as he takes the risk to confront the deeply embedded lies that constricted his life. You'll hear from Jennifer as she learns to work through her perceptions of body image and value. You'll hear from Amy as she learns to confront social comparisons about being single. You'll hear from Dave as he walks through a long season of depression only to rediscover his true self. You'll hear from Skyler as he wrestles with his reasons for dying and living. You'll hear from Neil as he confronts the deep tension of loving the self. And finally, you'll hear from Kristine as she fights through her imagination to discover her true value.

9

Redeeming the Mirror

by Kara Maddox

Hands trembling and eyes closed, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror. For the first time in years I was almost ready to look at my own reflection without quickly looking away. In that moment I was forced to face my fear. I had the choice to continue living in the pain and terror that constantly plagued me or open my eyes, breathe and see the woman staring back at me. But this mirror, like every other mirror, reflected back one of my most painful and deepest wounds.

The oppressive memory haunts my imagination. I was standing in the kitchen, my back to the front door. I heard him walk in and a deep fear overwhelmed me. I knew he was angry. I didn't even have time to fully turn around before his cold hands were around my neck. I could feel my breath quickly escaping me. I felt confused and helpless, wanting to fight back but paralyzed by shock. It would not be the last time he would terrorize me. I would find myself in a similar horror for many months to come.

Days later, he erupted again dragging me by my hair into the bathroom. He slammed my head into the wall before he stood me in front of the mirror. A mix of blood and tears were running down my cheeks. He kissed my neck and whispered, "I love you" and then he walked away. And in that moment his touch caused feelings of fear and pain, not love.

For hours I sat on that bathroom floor shaking and crying, ever so often peering at the frightened woman in the mirror. I was afraid to move and afraid to keep still. I learned to hate mirrors. All I saw reflecting back at me were bruises, scars and a woman plagued by fear and empty of any emotion. Each reflected back the horror of my

experience.

Over time, it became more manageable to hide my wounds than deal with them. No matter how much regret or penance, wandering and wondering I process, I couldn't change what happened. No one ever asked questions. No one spoke up. It seemed as if everyone withheld their judgment or opinion out of not wanting to involve themselves in my affairs. No one offered a helping word or a sense of empathy.

I remember passing by a police station one afternoon. My heart and my head screamed to pull into the parking lot and run inside. This would be my salvation. This would be the moment that I would finally confront my reality. I chose fear over courage that day, driving right past my moment of redemption. From that moment on, I had an alarming sense that a storm was approaching. I had lost all hope and belief that I would overcome, much less survive my own trauma.

Several months later, in the middle of summer, I would endure something so painful that even now I can't fully remember it all. I woke up in a hospital bed with a breathing tube in my throat, hooked up to several machines and realized I had survived, barely. I wasn't supposed to be alive. Hours before I had been given, and out of fear accepted, a handful of brightly colored pills. This would be my abuser's final attempt at taking my life. My life had almost been taken but not without my voice having been stolen first. For the next forty-eight hours there I would lie, abandoned in an isolated hospital room, just grateful to be alive. The nurse who came to my room every hour would never ask questions. She would only sit down next to me, hold my hand and silently pray. I saw a mark on her neck similar to one I had and knew that she understood what no one else ever had before then.

A recurring theme began to emerge. I had surrounded myself with people who just couldn't support me. No one else would show up to see me or provide a comforting word. The friends I trusted and thought I could count on assumed the worst and moved on

without ever looking back. The time alone allowed me to reflect on my circumstance. It gave me a sense of clarity that was empowering. Only I had the power to change my story. I wanted it to be a story of redeeming and redefining love.

I left the hospital and discovered that I was alone but I was alive. I wanted to believe at that moment I was free. Walking away from an abusive environment was only the first step and at the time it felt like it was the most difficult part. I chose to move hundreds of miles away. But distance and time would not separate me from my painful memories. They lingered in my mind like a creeping death, reminding me of my failure, my lack of care for myself, and how little I thought I was worth.

The process of physically removing myself from danger would be less traumatic than overcoming the mental anguish of it all. As much as I tried to ignore my pain, after several years I could no longer ignore that I was still living in that horror. To deal with the trauma, I had removed all of the mirrors from my new home and learned to avoid any that I came across in public. I couldn't stand to see the woman starting back at me.

I didn't want healing to be a slow and painful process. I wanted it to come miraculously, like the stories of Jesus healing people. I wanted to somehow walk away from my cane, and leave my blindness at the well. I wanted a story of God turning my life upside down in a way that produced joy.

But the miraculous moment never came. Instead I began to recognize that God was asking me to remove the obstacle keeping me imprisoned. God was asking me to face my own fears and look directly in the mirror. To engage the miraculous meant participating in my own restoration. It meant going back to that mirror.

Facing the mirror head-on was like walking into a burning building. It made no sense from this side of the act. I was like a firefighter walking into a burning building to save someone. The overwhelming fear is only trumped by the desire to save someone. And I was saving

myself.

I stepped into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror, eyes shut, ready for the fear to overwhelm me like so many times before. But I had come to a crossroads. This would not be the moment I would drive by my salvation. I would no longer participate in my own oppression. I would no longer be an accomplice in agreeing with the trauma.

This would instead be the moment I would face my oppressor, head on. And my oppressor had become me. In hiding from my own reflection, I was agreeing with his rejection of me. Yes, I was a woman who had experienced a past filled with abuse and self-hatred that I learned from my abuser. What happened was true. But his judgment that I was worthless was not true. And I was no longer willing to live with that judgment. I was no longer willing to live in isolation, closed off from intimacy and authentic relationships. I was finally prepared to stop and look at the woman staring back at me and see her for who she really was, a beloved child of God.

I slowly opened my eyes and looked in the mirror. For the first time I could see a woman of peace and strength. I could see a woman worth fighting for, a woman who could embody love and truth in her life. As I smiled, she smiled back. The moment I took that risk and made the decision to see the real me gave me a deep sense of hope. I had to name, call out and deny the lie that I was living under. I began speaking a mantra as I wept and looked deeply at my own reflection: "My past will no longer define who I am. I am loved. I will be able to love others again."

My miracle had arrived, but not without my participation. In other words, the miracle required work. How do you learn to love yourself when you've been told that the person staring at you in the mirror is unlovable? I decided to redefine what love looked like for me. Love doesn't leave bruises. Love doesn't terrorize or kill.

For years I had found it easy to live out of a victim mentality. Once I had identified myself as a victim of abuse or a survivor of a horrific

trauma, it was easy to believe that is all I was. But I knew I wanted more than that. My life would not be summed up by what I had endured and survived. I would be defined by the courage and desire to overcome. I craved love, community and the ability to trust again. I began to see that choosing to love myself was about believing and living out of the identity I had been given from God. Only after I received love from God and learned to love myself, was I able to fully love others.

Since that day I have stayed committed to the practice of love wherever I go, with whomever I meet. Learning to love the woman that I am, the creation of God, was also an opportunity to grow in my love for God and others. Christ's love knows no bounds. He never draws a line in the sand. There are times we may be unwilling to accept His love but there's never a time when He's not waiting to lavish me with His love.

Love isn't easy, but when does anything worth fighting come easy. Love requires sacrifice, humility and long-suffering. At times it's illogical. But ultimately **love is a choice**. I want to be someone that chooses to love, even when it's hard. I realize now that I get to wake up every day and make the decision to love the woman in the mirror. I get to choose to love those around me and allow them to love me back, no matter the circumstances. And when I do, I gain a story of love that is courageous, uncompromising and deeply authentic.

14

What Is Your Worth?

by Todd Hiestand

“You don’t have to prove your worth.”

I’ll always remember writing those words because I wrote them right before I fell into a deep state of despair. I had been writing in my journal when a loud, “CRACK!” exploded right behind me. Having wandered into a hunting area to do my journaling, I was certain—for a brief, life-shaking moment—someone was shooting at me. Perhaps not the most rational thought, but stupid things go through my head when I’m scared out of my mind.

As it turns out, no one was shooting at me. A large tree branch had fallen in the creek just below me and splashed with a crack. While I don’t pretend to know all that Providence intended with such an act, the drama served as an exclamation point on this new revelation.

This phrase has been revolutionary for my life. To understand why, I have to bring you back a few years. I grew up in a pretty amazing family. I love my parents. My parents love me, and they show it well. My mom is one of the most tenderhearted, caring people I have ever met. My dad is a close friend and mentor. I talk to him weekly about ministry situations and the many life questions I am dealing with as a pastor and father of four boys. My two oldest brothers are

two of my best friends in the world.

Unfortunately however, even an almost-perfect family cannot shield you from pain that inevitably comes in this broken world. There were three main experiences that I can identify that deeply shaped my perception of myself. And as a young man, these experiences really stung. They took my breath away, and shattered my perception about myself. The pain was very real.

The tree branch incident came at the end of two days I had taken in the woods of central Pennsylvania when I was in my late twenties. My goal was to get away and try to figure out my life. I was on the cusp of making a significant transition in my role as a leader at my current church. The pastor I had been working with was moving away. As a result I was shifting from a behind the scenes leader who nobody really ever looked at to the guy up front who everyone looked to for direction.

I was not ready.

I was not ready because I had spent the first twenty-six years of my life trying to prove that I belonged wherever I went. I assumed I didn't belong. I assumed everyone at our church agreed.

As I wrote in my journal that weekend I began to list all of the things that I hated about myself ... my perceived flaws. Sadly, the list grew long way too fast, faster than I had expected. I had never thought of some of the flaws on my list before. A few of them were so embarrassing, I wrote them down and then scratched them out. I couldn't stand to see them on the paper in front of me. As I laid out all of my flaws I became really pissed at God. Why did he allow these things to happen? Why did he make me the kind of person who would do these things? Soon I moved from being pissed at God to begging him to fix it. Fix me. Even as I asked for that I began to wonder if I was broken beyond repair.

That day, I finally landed on two big, important questions: "How do I see myself?" and "How does God see me?" The answers to the first

question were not that pleasant, the more I thought about them. I concluded three main things about that first question: 1) I see myself as someone who has a propensity to screw things up, 2) I see myself as one who is below others all the time, and 3) I see myself as someone who has historically been inadequate.

When it came down to it, I didn't see myself as anyone too special ... pretty much waiting for the next time that I would fail.

The fear wasn't really new. I had felt it many times before, but now I was calling it out. As a kid I had a recurring dream that usually accompanied regular night terrors. I could never really remember what the dream was about, but I recall waking up knowing I had screwed something up so bad that people were dead. As a young boy it terrified me. While in college I was able to better manage the night terror and when I came out of it I actually remembered the dream. I was in the Sears Tower in Chicago with some friends and somehow, I managed to cut the power off to the entire city while toppling the whole building and killing thousands of people.

That sums up how I viewed myself. I defined myself by failure of incredible proportions. This is the kind of dream I would have over and over as a kid. It always involved me being the cause of a major tragedy.

When I was twelve, I remember being so angry I ripped a picture of myself in half. I remember doing it, but I do not really remember why I did it. I guess it just seemed like the right thing to do. What would possess a kid to do that at such a young age? I think the answer is the inability to answer the second question I was asking: "What does God think of me?" I had let my experiences shape my perception of who I was, and I just assumed that was how God also saw me.

So I prayed,

"God, I am stuck between

doubt, confusion, worthlessness, shame

and

hope, grace, redemption, healing.

I am having a hard time getting my life out of the first.

I have a lot more baggage than I care to admit.

I desire deep in my heart to be a good, confident, strong
Husband.

Father.

Pastor.

Friend.

Mentor.

But God.

It is hard to be these things
when in my deepest parts of me

I think I am bound for failure
and that I am really a piece of shit.

This is how I feel.

This is where I am.

Lead me to a better place.”

You see, I had those secrets. Those experiences. I carried them around for quite some time. They killed my heart. Killed my soul. Destroyed my ability to accept that God loved me. Sure, I knew that God said he loved me, that Jesus died for me, and that I would go to heaven when I died. But God could see me as a failure and still do that for me because God is God. God loves idiots like me all the time. That's what makes God, God.

Ugh, those wounds. Yes, I knew that God forgave me for the things that needed forgiveness. I did not worry about that. It was not the guilt that haunted me. No, it was the shame.

The frustrating thing about all of this is that there are no assurances on some of these things. No assurance that I will not fail again in the future. No assurances that people will always accept me just as I am. No assurance that everything will be “okay.” No assurance that some of the things I run from will not catch up with me. And if I failed, make God would get tired of me, or just stop loving me.

What does this mean? Does this mean there is no hope? If I cannot be assured of these things, what does Jesus give? What do his life, death and resurrection mean? Does it mean that when I try and lead, people will follow? Does it mean that when I preach, people will be inspired? Does it mean that my kids will love me and never rebel? Does it mean that I will always be good enough? That I will always live up to my own, to say nothing of God's, expectations?

Or does it mean, in the midst of all that, all my failures, all my uncertainty, all my fears, that I am God's beloved?

As I sat and wrote in my journal, contemplating my own sense of despair, I came up with these words.

What does this even mean? Beloved? What does it mean that I am really loved by God? Not just forgiven. Not just let off the sin hook. But really, truly loved. Does it mean that in the midst of my screw ups, my anxiety, and my failure I am still okay? That I do not need to be special in the world's eyes? That I do not need to prove my worth?

I finished with a brand new thought.

“You don't have to prove your worth.”

Cue tree branch.

It finally occurred to me that I didn't need to prove my worth. This is what I had spent my life doing. The ironic part is that I had been trying to prove something to others that I did not believe myself. When I failed, I didn't care too much about anyone seeing me as a failure. While that sucked, it was far worse when I proved to myself what I always feared to be true.

I had to ask myself: What it would be like for me to take seriously the belief that I am God's beloved?

I had been walking around saying, "I'm just a sinner saved by grace." I had been amazingly competent at finding ways to exchange the truth of God with the things of this world. I am stunningly adept at worshipping the creation (myself) instead of the Creator. But I was afraid that if I looked directly at my failures, it would truly define me, and God wouldn't love me.

But that's not where I needed to start. I did not start out as a worthless sinner. Genesis does not start at chapter three. Genesis started in chapter one. I began as a creature made in the very image of God. I am God's reflection. And that is no small gift. When I entered the world, God called me "very good."

This is where I believe the gospel starts: God has made me in His image and calls me "very good." I am God's beloved child, made for wonderful communion with him. In fact, I am the pinnacle of creation.

So yes, sin is part of my story. The image I bear has been distorted. But God has not torn his self-portrait in half. God has sent his Son to remake in me the very thing he values most: the image of himself. The beautiful thing about being made in the image of God is that I do not lose the unique way that God has made me. In fact, I become my most true self. The "me" that God intended. Learning to see myself through God's eyes means learning to see myself as one who bears his image, and who will, by his grace, bear the perfect image of the Son the way he intended all along.

Bottom line? Deep down, at your core, I am worth loving simply because I am God's.

I do not have to prove myself to anyone, especially not God.

18

How I Learned to Wear Lycra in Public

by Jennifer Luitwieler

I grew up outside. My family continually sought adventure in every season. We spent summer days canoeing and floating through the clear streams of Western Pennsylvania. If we weren't boating, we were swimming in Sugar Lake. If we weren't swimming, we were diving, jumping, balancing on cast-off floatation devices. I didn't say we were smart ... I said we were active. In the gold-speckled autumn, we rode our bikes for miles on mountain paths beside the rivers that were now too cold for swimming. In the winter we skied and in spring we camped. Dad always had a plan. My mother still laughs when she remembers our brother's first ski lesson, happily cooing strapped to my dad's back as he hurtled down the hills in upstate New York.

Our outdoor adventures also meant participating in organized sports. I enjoyed softball and basketball. I won't lie; part of the appeal lay in the required new shoes and uniform. Dad made acquiring these items a special event. We climbed into the Volare and shuttled across town to Thom McCann Shoes. They had a spinning horse ride we could play with when we got bored. I never got bored when I got to go, alone with my dad, to buy shoes for sports.

As a parent, I realize how much money he poured into my whims, as my children's growth has seemingly eclipsed my income. But Dad never said a word about that. He never tried to talk me out of it. He never worried aloud about my athletic abilities, or potential lack thereof. He threw himself into every thing I wanted to try. My dad, like many fathers, is not a verbal man; I knew he loved me, though, especially when I spent time with him shopping for shoes.

In the frigid winters of basketball season, Dad drove up the hill to the elementary school for practice in the evenings. I would cuddle my brand new, incredibly white PONY high-tops on my lap. Everyone knew you didn't wear your outside shoes on the basketball court. He would pat my leg the way he always did, the way he does even now when we visit: three times, softly, then give it three swift rubs. Always. I looked at my dad, assured, and then stepped into the night.

I liked playing basketball, and I tried to please our coach, Mr. Toothman, who said I could sure rebound. Turns out, this was the only basketball term I understood. For the rest of two seasons, I never knew what I was doing, but damn it if I wasn't going to get a rebound. The Hyde Hawks featured some future all-stars, like Pam and Aimee. Pam was so fast she could steal the ball mid-bounce. She'd have two points before you turned around. Aimee was the coach's daughter. I wanted to be as good a player as Aimee. We were friends, but I never understood a basketball word her dad said.

So I switched to softball. I could understand softball. You hit. You run. You throw. Pretty simple. My team, The Swallows, wore light blue t-shirts. The team consisted of all my friends. I liked softball, but I loved being with the team. I could run my mouth with my "besties" at every practice, between innings and in the car to and from practice. Softball was social. Every day in the summer was a softball day. I played catcher and my best friend played pitcher.

One summer, just before I hit puberty and all its nastiness, I tried out for and made a traveling team. I was an important component of this team; it was my distinct job to keep the bench warm for the

other players when they were on the field. It takes a special kind of skill to win that job. I did manage to see some playing time that single season. Coach hollered at me to take right field. I took right field. And like some cruel Hollywood iteration gone horribly, horribly wrong, my worse nightmares confronted me. The Ball! It was approaching me. Fast. I can still see my coach's face turn from a mild flamingo pink to a bloody beet red as the ball caromed toward me. His mouth moved in slow-mo as he yelped wordlessly for me to field the ball. My head filled with thoughts about technique and glove positioning. I extended my glove, I bent my knees, and I reached for the green grass to stop the ball. And then I watched the ball roll right through my legs.

Yes, that was the end of my softball career.

I quit sports the same time I "became a woman," if you will. There is no easy way to maneuver through those years. This happy kid morphed into an ungainly, awkward goober with awkward thoughts, the Ugly Duckling in reverse. What kind of mean trick was this? No handbook describes how to grow into your new body, how to catch your mind up to your boobs, how to be a kid who could quite literally bear kids.

Adolescence was not kind to me. Then again adolescence does not discriminate. I became so aware of my body and its changes that I did not want to participate in sports. I didn't want people looking at my long legs, the widened hips. I did not want to wear athletic bras to reduce bounce. I did not want to *need* a bra at all.

The messages I heard from various sources confused me. My mother complimented my grace and beauty. My father reminded me that without kindness, looks mean nothing. They chose their words carefully. At the same time, the world, and those ridiculous magazines, yelled at me to get a boyfriend, to shave my legs, to wear hipper glasses. The voices I trusted, my parents', sank under the din of a second, louder voice. I didn't understand the voice, but I listened anyway.

It wasn't until my mom said, "No more black swimsuits for you.

They're too sexy," that I grew uncomfortable with my body. I felt a cosmic shift inside my skin and I did not like it. I was ashamed. This body that used to fit me and work with me so easily had revolted. It had turned into something other, something provocative and suggestive and ... gross.

Now that I'm a mom, I know what my mother meant. She did not mean her daughter was some trollop. She wanted to talk about appropriateness. It's one of her fortes: appropriateness. I will probably make those same choices for my own daughters. And yet. The words, her words, slapped my face and slammed through my head. I felt blame and scorn. I felt like my body, with its curves and shape, hollered for attention I did not seek. So I stopped letting that body be seen.

I couldn't get dressed in the morning without confusion. The war between voices—My Parents vs. The World—continued in my head. My solution was to hide my body with baggy clothes and to stop competing athletically. I broke up with sports; they were for dumb jocks anyway, I told myself.

I put away childish things and scorned my physical self.

By the time I met my husband, at 19, I did not own athletic shoes. I did not own athletic gear of any type. I did not wear my hair in a jaunty ponytail for a quick game of tennis. I steered quite clear of those things. I fashioned myself into a serious student with little time for the trivia of play.

But this boy, this super cute boy, was calling me, and talking to me, and wanting to hang out with me. And this boy? He was a hardcore athlete. Running, soccer, biking, basketball, triathlons ... you name it, he played it. The cute boy also loved to play. Everything was a game, or had game potential. Waiting to be seated at a restaurant, he'd make a game using paper napkins and plastic spoons. Throw him a basketball but no hoop and he'd have a group playing horse with a trashcan. He was magical; he produced play from thin air.

When we began dating, I had to buy running shoes. The activities he had me doing required nothing less. We played on an intramural softball team. We walked through parts of the city I'd never visited. We climbed hills and mountains. Biked. Jogged. Played volleyball, pick-up basketball. My sensible, serious English major shoes would not cut it in his world.

We married, we moved, we had babies. I continued to buy running shoes. We wanted to encourage the love of the game in our children. And so it went. Until recently. Only now, many years after puberty, I have finally reconciled that new (not anymore) body to the activities I used to love.

About a year ago, I decided to start running. It was a decision born of frustration. Our dog used our house as his own personal toilet. I resolved to train him and myself simultaneously. I did not suspect that I was embarking upon a chapter of healing that taught me things I had tried so hard not to learn.

At first, I was a reluctant runner. I kept only a loose record of times and distances. I worried about passing cars being privy to the horror that was I, jiggling my self down the street. Would you like waking up to soft moms in Lycra? Me, either. Yet there I was, bouncing down the main thoroughfare, passing kids, buses, carloads of people. I tried to be as small as possible. I turned up my music to drown out the jeering crowds telling me to take my big butt home.

Over time, I could run farther and faster than I had ever imagined. I began not to notice others going about their business. For the first time since I was a kid, I enjoyed the movement of running, the freedom of play. I realized that just as I focused on my running, others were focused on whatever they were doing. My imagined spectators were just that: imagined.

In other words I finally realized that exactly no one cared about some old lady running down the street.

As I continued to run, my confidence grew. As my confidence grew, my mileage ascended. I registered for and ran my first ever 15k. I ran, by myself and unassisted by music, nine freaking miles. I did not worry about my body parts. I did not try to shrink into the shadows, afraid that I might be noticed. I rolled my shoulders back and rocked that race.

I learned to love running, but I learned something more powerful, more enduring and far more important. I learned to love myself.

Not just this newly-fashioned runner self, with her slimmer silhouette and her Lycra tights. Not the mom who made intentional decisions about every single aspect of her kids' day. I moved beyond loving **how** I operated in my roles, and I began to accept every part of myself: the slightly misshapened nose, the oddly proportioned hips, and the funky toes. I didn't just accept the goofy parts. I accepted the good parts, too. I am funny and smart. I am a good friend and confidant. I am not terribly hard on the eyes.

Yes. I run, but I discovered that I am more than the sum of my roles and a whole lot more than an odd bit of flesh squished into running pants. I'm also a mother, a wife, a daughter and a sister. I love Steelers football and coffee in pretty mugs. I like to knit. My sheets must be tucked in with precision. My hips, curvy and bouncy though they may be, are mine. We work in concert, this body and me, to run the outdoors.

Loving Our Neighbor

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.” Leviticus 19:18

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 19:19

As we turn to the next section, we must go back to the command that informs it. Jesus calls us to love our neighbor ... as ourselves. The command invites us to seek out the welfare of the person next to us in the same way we would want for ourselves. It invites us to participate in the restoration of community in a way that is intrinsically valuable.

The delicate tension of our humanity is often found in how we cultivate and manage our relationships with our neighbors, the people we live next to and relate to on a daily basis. The reality is that we live in proximity to people. As much as we can choose to isolate ourselves from community, the loss of community reveals its value. We need people, in order to survive and even thrive in the world. We need people around us who can be love for us. So the command actually invites us to be for our neighbor what we also need.

Neighbors aren't like enemies. Neighbors are the people we usually want to be in relationship with. Neighbors are the people who live next to us in our communities and in our cubicles. Proximity requires that we work it out.

What is interesting about the invitation to love our neighbor is that it's proactive. Jesus doesn't begin with a passive response to relationship. Jesus invites us to actively call out and see the value of the person next to us. The command incites us to imagine a world in harmony, where everyone is seeking out the welfare of the person next to him or her. It feeds our soul with the possibility of peace at a very basic level, in the streets.

This idea to proactively love our neighbor often flies in the face of reality. Sometimes our neighbor is just not that lovable. As we experience each other in relationship, we often experience the baggage that comes with it, too. People dump their despair all over their lawns (metaphorically and literally) and invite the world to just deal with it. It is in these moments that we are confronted with the tension in the command. Sometimes loving our neighbor requires deeply sacrificing for our neighbor. It requires stepping into their suffering with a sense of empathy and listening with an attentive ear to their suffering.

And it is in these moments that loving our neighbor often creates the deepest relationships. When we share in each other's suffering, not for the sake of invading or evading, but just recognizing the deep intrinsic worth in the other, when we sit in the midst of their pain and let them know, "someone is still here," we discover that the other is just like us, a human being.

Of all the commands, loving our neighbor could be considered the most tangible because of the sheer volume of neighbors we encounter on a daily basis. To love our neighbor is to give deeply of what is true. When we love, we give people a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. We give them a glimpse of heaven. We remind them that each of us is worth fighting for.

Continue with us as we explore stories of people engaging what it means to love our neighbor. In this section, you'll hear from Carol as she contemplates love in the midst of holding onto a different faith than her family's heritage. You'll hear from Cheryl as she wrestles

with overcoming the misunderstandings that come from being in relationship with her neighbors. You'll hear from Beth as she fights her way through a debilitating disease that brings harsh words from those around her. You'll hear from Zihna as she struggles through the tension of marriage and what it means to love in the process of letting go. You'll hear from Nathan as he struggles and confronts his own hubris.

You'll also hear from Martin as he contemplates the cost of welcoming those who are traditionally on the outside. You'll hear from Annie as she literally works through loving a neighbor that doesn't seem to want to be loved. You'll hear from John as he searches for the lines between rescuing and loving those in need. You'll hear from Alan as he stretches out to invest in "the neighborhood." And you will hear from Trevar as he ponders his own hypocrisy in being the church. And finally, you'll hear from Neil as he struggles to be love for someone who has been shattered by circumstance.

24

Facing the Unequal Yoke

by Carol Howard Merritt

I traced the baby-blue brocade pattern of the chair with my finger, avoiding the gaze of my therapist across from me. I was trying to think. I looked up to see the window peering out on the street, another welcome distraction. Her gaze was still on me; I could feel it. She was waiting for my answer, and I guess I was waiting for it, too. I had no idea what it was.

I had told her about a series of things members of my family had done that irritated me. She asked, "Did you tell them that they frustrated you?"

I answered, "Of course not!"

"How are they going to know, if you don't tell them?"

"I *can't* tell them," I said earnestly.

"Why? What's the worst thing that can happen if you begin to communicate how you feel?"

"I'll lose them," I responded and gripped the arms of the chair. Out of nowhere, I felt my collar constricting and began to take shorter breaths. I was sweating but didn't know why. "I'm just not ready to lose them yet," I said, imagining members of the family, flitting away

like dragonflies, out of my life.

They wouldn't cause a big scene. There wouldn't be a big blow-up. They would just talk about me when I was out of the room and never talk to me when I was in the room. They would smile and be cordial, but they would never *really* speak to me again.

"Why do you think you're going to lose your family?" she pushed, trying to understand the dynamics that led me to her office.

"Because," I began, then halted. I didn't know how to finish the sentence. I breathed a little deeper. I no longer felt as if I was choking, but I was disoriented. I wanted to say, "Because that's how families work. That's what families *do*." But I could tell from her line of questioning that families didn't work that way, at least not usually. And why did I think mine would?

Fidgeting with the chair, my eyes wandered around the room, and I sorted through the people in my head, imagining who would reject me and who would still accept me.

The organizing helped. I could distinguish a clear dividing line. The recovering alcoholics and the alcoholics would accept me. The Mainline Protestants would accept me. The conservative Evangelical Christians would walk away. I'd lose them, I was sure of it.

Sitting there in the silence, I began to exhale. And when all of the breath should have been expelled, I kept exhaling, until I noticed this gaping hole in my chest. It had once been filled with my closest friends and loved ones, but now all that remained was a horrid, overwhelming cavity.

They had left. When I no longer believed in the same way that they did, when I began to question my faith, when I slipped into doubt, and even when my relationship with God deepened and I discerned God's call to become a pastor, they had stopped speaking and writing to me.

Wait. I got a letter from one friend, who outlined her disapproval in great detail. But from most of them, I got icy silence. First, I stopped

receiving regular letters. Then I was dropped from Christmas card lists. Finally my name was overlooked when they sent their wedding invitations. I learned third-hand about their children. It took a couple of years to realize I had been shunned. I deleted their names from my own contact list. They weren't going to respond.

I walked around with this gaping hole, sometimes laughing about it and other times ignoring it. I tried to fill it with work, study and new friends. But sitting in that office, with the attentions of the therapist focused on me, with her steady inquiries and patient silence, I was forced to return to the edge of that abyss and stare into it.

Why did they do it? How could they simply turn their backs on me? Were we ever friends in the first place? Did they really cut me off because I believed *differently* than they did? Could the bond of friendship really not bear the difference between someone who believed that the Bible was inspired and another person who believed that every word of the Bible was without error? Could it not handle the possibility that a woman might have something to say in the pulpit? Were the theological litmus tests that ruled our relationships that sensitive?

With sudden grief, the answer came to me. Why did I think I was going to lose my family? Because they were "good" Christians, and that was what "good" Christians did. They encouraged tough love toward those who didn't toe the party line.

I had experienced the rejection so many times that I was sure my own mother, father and sister would never speak to me again because I didn't believe in the same way that they did. I imagined them walking away because "right belief" would mean more to them than the love that held us together as a family.

As an effort to remain a part of the family, I would suffer any indignities in silence. I would hold on to them, nurse them for years. But I could not directly tell family members about them. That would upset the whole system and then I'd surely lose them.

“Carol, you’re not going to lose your family,” the therapist assured me. “But you’re about to lose yourself.”

The panic released me. But then grief engulfed me, and tears began to flow.

For many Evangelicals, friendship and even family relations are second to right belief and behavior.¹ Friendship and love are often used as tools for evangelism. Once the person becomes a fully committed Evangelical, friendship becomes an instrument for maintaining social norms. The relationship is a bait and switch, a carrot and stick sort of deal.

I learned this at Bible school. Bill Hybels, the founder of Willow Creek and a leader of our nation’s megachurch movement, came to speak at an assembly. Hybels is an extremely likeable guy. Not that I ever got close to him, but up on that stage, he had a most captivating personality. At that point, he was young and building an incredible church outside of Chicago.

We didn’t realize that Hybels was starting a movement. It would not be long before pastors from around the country would take the remote roads, follow the parking lot attendants’ instructions, and hike to the mall-like structure so that they could take notes on how to build a Willow Creek of their own. But even then, as Hybels spoke, we jotted down his words. That day, he stood in the pulpit and admitted that he had friends who were non-Christians.

It was hard for me to wrap my brain around that one. I had lots of friends who weren’t into the whole church thing, but that was a guilty pleasure. I knew that my friendships needed to be limited to particular church people. Evangelical friendship was restricted to real Christians, and real Christians were rare. The world was filled with men and women who claimed Christianity, but it was against

¹ When I use the term “Evangelical,” I am referring to the particular conservative Evangelical milieu in which I was raised. Back then, we called ourselves Fundamentalists. Now, my family prefers the term Evangelical. Out of respect for them, I use the term, although I realize that it does not reflect the diverse and rich spectrum of Evangelicalism.

such people, such wolves in sheep's clothing, that we had to be on guard. Their faith wasn't genuine. If we became friends with them, we would be "unequally yoked."

A yoke was a common tool in Jesus' day that went over the shoulders of two oxen, so that they could pull a heavy load together. In order for it to work properly, the animals had to be evenly matched in strength and speed; otherwise, they might end up going in circles. Likewise, we were to have friends who were like us in behavior and belief. If we succumbed to a close friendship or a loving relationship with someone who was not a Bible-believing, every-word-is-without-error Christian, we too would circle in confusion.

If we noticed someone else wandering from the path of right behavior and belief, then we needed to lead them back. According to Evangelical teaching, the best way to do that would be to withhold our affections.

This idea of withholding affection was of utmost importance for evangelical parents. James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, taught "tough love." He explained that if a son or daughter was addicted to alcohol, drugs, or medication, if he or she was lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, then accepting your child will mean that he or she will never recover or become straight again. Distraught parents often turned to this advice. They rejected their children, ripping their families apart, with the hope that they would come back to the fold.

Quite clearly then, love and friendship were a powerful force for keeping people on track and making sure that they adhered to Evangelical social norms. So, I almost dropped my pencil when I heard Bill Hybels admit to being friends with unbelievers. I put my notebook on my lap and leaned forward, eager to understand him correctly. I couldn't imagine this great leader palling around with non-Christians.

Eager, until Hybels explained that being friends with people who were not like us could lead to opportunities to share the gospel.

He talked about “friendship evangelism,” giving us the freedom to form relationships with people of “the world,” as long as our ulterior motive was to share Jesus with them.

I sat back again. That made sense. Friendship was still a tool. Hybels was just adding another blade to the nifty pocketknife: Friendship was shared in order to support other Christians, cut off to woo people back into the fold, *and* used to attract people to Jesus Christ.

This logic was perfectly sensible, as long as I was in control of the friendships. I could manipulate people into behaving and believing the way they ought. If they didn’t, then I would get out the tiny scissors and cut them off with one easy snip.

Yet, it was a much different matter when I was the one being cut off.

When I planned to attend seminary, my loved ones severed the cord that bound us. During this long separation from my community, I studied the notion of friendship, reading philosophers, theologians and the Scriptures.

Jesus began his ministry by gathering a group of friends who were at the core of his work. In fact, they were so important that I imagined Jesus, surrounded by eating, drinking and dancing when he stood up and proclaimed that there wasn’t any greater love than a person who gave up his or her life for a friend.

Growing up in church, I always heard these words in the context of Jesus’ death. He was foretelling the crucifixion and giving himself an advanced pat on the back for the sacrificial work he was about to do. But the proclamation struck me differently this time.

There was no higher form of love than a life-giving friendship. Not a love for right belief, not a love for good behavior, but the love between friends. Friends were to be open to one another, sharing their lives with each other—not just dying for one another—but giving the everyday, ordinary moments to one another. Jesus made these mundane revelations and everyday epiphanies of our days burst with love.

By the time I left the counselor's office, I felt burdened by that heavy yoke. I had been pulled and pushed by things that I didn't think or believe. She was right. I was losing myself in the process.

So I started practicing love by crawling out from under the brutal yoke and looking into the faces of my family. It was an arduous process. They were often disappointed when I honestly shared my life with them, but they still loved me. And through their steadfast kindness, I found that, truly, there was no greater love.

34

Mandee

by Neil Christopher

I was raised in what some would call a “Christian bubble:” private school, church two to three times a week, youth group, Sunday school, Christian family, Christian friends... the whole shebang! Heck, I wasn’t even allowed to watch most movies, TV shows or listen to “secular” music. Then one day, Mandee came along and screwed it all up.

I had convinced my parents to let me attend a nearby public school instead of my normal private school because I was really interested in and was showing great potential in art, a subject in which the private school offered no real programs to boast of, and the public school was rated very high in. I was 15 and about to turn 16 at the time. I did well there; I kept my nose clean (for the most part) and my grades up.

I did however for the first time start to meet and make friends with people who were well outside of my previous sphere and Mandee sure fit into that category.

I was a straight A student; she was failing just about every class. When I first met her, she literally ran into me as she was dashing out the double-doors and into a car. She was ditching class and peeled

out of the school parking lot before security caught on. For some reason, that day marked the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

As beautiful and full a life Mandeë possessed, she had also experienced more pain than anyone I had ever met before in my entire life. By the time I turned 16 she had tried to take her life. Her family placed her in a psychiatric hospital; to see her I had to drive to her ward. I made the trip as often as I could, normally once a week, and spoke with her on the phone often. I was saddened to learn that all of her other friends, and even family, didn't do the same.

All of a sudden, this 16-year-old Christian bubble-boy saw and learned about pain ... real pain. Not being upset because you didn't win that football game pain, not dad won't let me listen to *Bon Jovi* or I didn't get a date to the prom pain, but the kind of pain whose recognition transforms you forever.

I learned that in life and not just in movies or T.V people get abused, molested and raped. I saw alcoholism, drug addiction, detoxing and relapsing. I saw depression, suicide and heard cries of pain that still ring in my ears to this day. My bubble, my protective bubble that my parents and church worked so hard to set up around me, had finally burst; I had learned that life itself was broken, and it broke me.

I initially thought that if I prayed hard enough there would be a miracle. I thought that if I loved her enough it would cure her. I thought that the solution was God and that God could work through me if I were just holy enough. My days with Mandeë ended abruptly. She was beaten one night at her home, so she ran out to find drugs to make the pain go away, found herself in the home of a dealer and his friends, who then drugged her and gang raped her. When she sobered up the next day, the events of the night before were the final straw.

I would never see my Mandeë again.

When I came to my church and asked my pastors why such a loving God would allow such horrors to exist in this world, they gave me a

simple, two-part answer: God chooses to work through people. And maybe God was trying to work through me and I didn't do my job. Maybe this was my fault and not God's? Did I pray enough? Was I without sin enough? Did I witness enough?

As anyone can imagine, I carried this guilt around with me for years. At first I hated myself, but dedicated my life to trying to "be better" because I believed that lie that maybe if I was a better Christian I would have been able to save Mandee. When I found out that this was a lie I both hated God and myself.

When I finally came back to my faith, fell back in love with God and myself, and realized how destructive and wrong these pastor's words were, I decided two things: I was going to spend my life loving the Mandees of the world and I was going to become a youth pastor so no kids in my care ever have to go through what I did.

So, I guess I was mistaken when I said that I would never see Mandee again ... because I see her all the time. I saw her last night when a gay man who knew that I was a pastor and a loving ear, grabbed me at the bar and talked to me for hours about his thoughts of suicide. I saw her in the teenage girl who I am working with that was raped at 16, and is now sleeping around with men over twice her age. Mandee is in the homeless drunk I am trying to help find a job. I see Mandee every day.

My parents once told me that they remember that time in my life, and they wished it never happened to me, because they knew I saw pain and it forever changed me. I can only tell you that I am grateful for my time with her for the exact same reasons.

When God became a man, for the first time He functioned out of compassion, and all of a sudden our Gospel became one of grace, mercy and love. Now I realize that it wasn't until I saw and experienced pain myself that I was truly capable of loving people.

That grace and that love carries on into every part of my ministry today, and I am a better Christian—no, a human being—for it. I don't

think there any quick fixes, but even if there are miracles I think the greatest miracle is God meeting us where we are at and simply loving us anyway. That is the God that I fell back in love with, and the kind of man I want to be to anyone that crosses my path.

It's not perfect, maybe, but I think recognizing my own brokenness is what makes love perfect.

Loving Our Enemy

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Matthew 5:43-44

Our final section brings us to the enemy. Jesus called us to go beyond our comfort zones of family and friends and to extend love, even to those who would do us harm. In taking love to this level, he was creating a radical notion of inclusivity, community, and the Kingdom of God. He was calling out the potential of restoring everything within our sphere of influence.

As one of the authors will suggest, what's unique about the command to love our enemy is that it's the first category Jesus mentions in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus frames love as something that goes beyond anything we would typically imagine. He frames it in a way that continually calls us to let go of our defense mechanisms and build bridges of peace.

An enemy is a unique category because it's entirely constructed. We have to determine someone as an enemy. At some point in our lives, we decide that someone, given the chance, can and likely will do us harm. We have to decide who is on the outside of the walls of our relationships.

An enemy takes various forms. As much as it's the person over there, hidden beneath the coat of political ideology, an enemy is just as likely to be someone within our own house. It is often someone

we know, a family member, spouse, or neighbor, and yet life has conspired in a way that we're at odds with that person.

What's interesting is that Jesus acknowledges the enemy. He doesn't scold us and tell us we don't have one, or that everyone is supposed to be our friend. He begins with our reality that some people are our enemies. And yet in spite of our reality, he invites us to transcend that perceived harm by returning love for hate.

Once again, the call to love our enemy is remarkably practical. Keeping tabs on an enemy takes an amazing amount of mental and physical energy. Managing the potential possibilities for harm takes an amazing amount of our mental resources in order to constantly defend our territory. We have to anticipate multiple possibilities, most of which will likely never happen. The practice of keeping enemies then robs us of our ability to engage life with a sense of hopeful freedom.

As the words of Jesus suggest, hating our enemy is the more socially acceptable approach. It's just easier to set up boundaries that protect "us" at the expense of "them." But in setting up those boundaries, we unknowingly blind ourselves to the image of God that resides in the enemy.

Loving our enemies also calls us into a much deeper way of living. To love the enemy requires that we transcend our own sense of punitive justice. It requires that we lay down our hatred and demand for equal suffering. Loving the enemy then allows us to see the larger Kingdom of God in our midst. It calls us to participate with God in revealing that Kingdom, even when it's hard.

What's unique about this group of stories is the sense of courage each author displays in the midst of the tension. Loving the enemy is the uncommon path, yet each chose to step into it. They don't deny the pain and suffering of those harmed, nor do they present a picture of a practice that easy. And yet, it is this courage in the face of fear that makes it astonishing.

Venture one last time as we explore stories of people engaging what it means to love our enemy. In this section, you'll hear from Jarrod as he meets and gets mugged by Jesus. You hear from Jamie, who calls out the importance of love for our enemy even when it feels impossible. You'll hear from Brian as he shares the healing power of remembering the dignity of both oneself AND the enemy. You'll hear from Mike as he wrestles with loving someone who stands guilty of a scandalous crime.

You'll also hear from Ron as he learns to see the God image in a man that is supposed to be his enemy, but reveals God in a profound way. You'll hear from Naomi, who chose to directly confront her enemies and yet not give into the same hate. You'll hear from Jake, a pastor wrestling with his own frustrations with being love to the enemy next door. You'll hear from Jeremy who gives us a deeply restorative way to see the original idea of, "heaping burning coals on one's head." You'll hear from Hugh, a passionate minister as he confronts his own understanding of loving the enemy. You'll hear from Melissa as she struggles to love someone she has to work with, who just won't get along. And finally, you'll hear from Bradley, as he confronts what it means to hear the words, "I don't love you anymore."

35

I Met Jesus. He Mugged Me.

by Jarrod McKenna

My testimony is I met Jesus and he mugged me.

Feeling the earth shake as bombs fall. Sitting in solitary in a prison cell. Face-to-face with a man who was said to have been involved in fundraising for the terrorism that murdered two guys who celebrated my eighteen birthday with me. Being named a "Peace Fellow" with people who have been nominated for the Nobel Prize. Working in prison with men who did to others what I've been in counseling to come to terms with having been done to me. Standing on a stage in front of 60,000 people. Fearing the hooves of riot police horses after being knocked to the ground.

There are a number of times in my journey I've asked myself, "How did I get here?"

The short answer: *grace*.

The longer response?

I know many like the one-off impressive conversion story. But that's not my story. Even some famous conversions like St. Francis of Assisi's moment of "kissing the leper" were the culmination of years of searching and struggling. It contained ordinary moments of awe

that moved him toward this encounter, like the lesser-known story of St. Francis walking home from the pub after “a few too many,” and being struck by the beauty of the stars. “If these are the creatures,” Francis said, “How great must the Creator be.”

I don’t want to take away from the spiritual formation the beauty of creation has played in my own journey but if I had a “kissing a leper” moment in response to the question, “How did I get here?” this might be it.

I was 18. It was my first year in University, studying Fine Arts. I was coming back on the train and I had been reading Martin Luther King Jr. for the first time. I got off at Warwick train station. I was walking over the overpass bridge away from the train station and in my typical ADD dreamland state, I thought of Dr. King’s talk of the nonviolent resistance of the early Christians. I had hardly noticed the big guy in a dark tracksuit with his sleeves rolled up walking toward me.

Still a couple of meters off, he loudly grunted something at me. I missed what he said. A little shocked to have Jarrod’s dream world interrupted, I quickly tried to piece together what he had said ... I definitely heard the word “money.” Thinking he asked for a few bucks to catch the train, I got my wallet out.

Bad move.

Lunging at me with his fist clenched and other hand reaching for something in his pocket, he yelled, “Give me your money!”

At that point a number of things went through my head.

These are the moments that film directors slow down the camera for because there is so much going on. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the luxury of “slow mo.” As great it would have been if he could have given me a moment and hummed a few bars of some thinking music while I considered my options, that was about as likely as me getting out of that situation without a visit to the hospital.

A number of things flashed through my head. I could split. The only

thing with running was I was wearing my backpack with all my art equipment in it. If I ran this would make my get away, at best, a fast waddle. Not to mention ... he's Huge! This option was not hard to disregard, given my towering 5'7-foot stature. Or I could hit him. Only ... he's huge! Maybe I could get one cheap short and if he wants to have kids he'll have to adopt. More likely, I take a short at him, then he, unaffected, like a machine in a Terminator movie, then transforms me into a red puddle formally known as Jarrod.

I joke about it now but there was nothing funny at the time. If you've ever been mugged, held up, or threatened violently you know the shock can be numbing. What next flashed through my head short-circuited my panic and crazy split-second plans of "split" or "hit." The words of Jesus that Martin Luther King Jr. had been experimenting with:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, do not violently resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.'" (my paraphrase of Matt 5:38-41)

The flash of those words in my imagination felt like warm oil over my head, and with it came a tangible sense of *this is how God has related to me*. For the first time in the situation I felt grounded. I had already gotten out my wallet, so I reached in and gave him what I had, which was only ten dollars; you'd think he'd have known better than to choose an art student as his victim.

I'm still not sure why but I didn't simply hand over the money. I stuck out my hand and said, "I'm Jarrod."

Wide-eyed and with mouth open, he grabbed my hand and grunted, "James!"

Surprised and confused I said, "No, Jarrod."

To which he said with a surprise to match mine, "No. I'm *James*."

"Oh," I said.

There was an awkward pause. This was by far the weirdest passing of the peace I'd been involved with.

I noticed his arm.

The bruising ran all along it, interrupted only by the scaring that rivaled a pincushion. James' arm was offered to me like an ikon in an Orthodox worship service, so that I could contemplate the depth of his pain and all the desperate attempts to escape it. He couldn't have been more than a couple of years older than me. Maybe not yet 20. I've since worked with a lot of people with serious drug addictions and my best friend from high school only a year later would die with a needle in his arm, but still to this day I haven't seen an arm so badly hit up. The next thing that hit me was the stench. Like stale urine mixed with cigarettes.

As we stood on the bridge suspended above the freeway, James launched into his life story at a pace that rivaled the cars passing below.

His words seemed to overtake each other, then cut each other off. He said he was sorry to be doing this to me, that he was in a bad way. He'd been doing really well, he was on the naltrexone program and getting off the stuff but then his mum kicked him out of home again and now he was back on the streets.

In a mix of impulsiveness, habit and not knowing what else to do, I asked him to do what I'd asked many people I'd met on the street: come back to my house, eat, have a shower and get a change of clothes. I'd try to find him a new place to stay. Only this was the first time I'd made an offer to entertain an angle who had threatened me.

Another awkward pause.

He started about four different words, finishing none of them. He seemed totally knocked off balance. I guess he'd done this a heap

of times but this was the first time he had an invite to dinner! And I'd invited a lot of random crew back for dinner but this was the first time I'd done it to someone threatening me. Then, a young woman dressed in a black tracksuit darted through the middle of us both on the bridge, a bag under her arm, yelling, "Go! Go! We gotta go!"

At the time I didn't know if she'd been hassled by security guards at the train station or if she had stolen the bag but it was clear that she knew James and she wanted to get out of there, fast.

"Wait, James, before you go ..." I shuffled in my backpack passed my art gear and textbooks to reach in and grab the little New Testament I always carried with me. "It's got my name and number in it if you ever change your mind about a place to stay."

For the first time, since I was staring at this big guy's fist, it got ugly again.

James got right up in my face and started yelling, "What do I want a Bible for? I'm going to hell!" His face contorted with an anger that had an intensity, which explained his arm.

Without even thinking, I found myself saying, "James, we're all going to hell. That's why Jesus came."

Now, I know that statement rates low on the theological 'wow' scale (and maybe embarrassingly high on the theological cringe factor) but it's what I said. What happened next I think was one of the weirdest experiences of my life. It was my kissing the leper moment. Figuratively ... I didn't "make out" with the guy. This big guy who, only moments earlier was ready to beat me up (if not worse), just started crying.

I'm not talking one tear, sad movie crying. He burst out crying. Like a little kid does. Suddenly this pain, which was so visible in his anger, on his scarred arms and in his situation, seemed to burst like a floodgate at the news of God's love for him.

As this big guy stood their crying, I honestly didn't know what to do. In the same way that my response had put him off balance, James'

tears now totally threw me. I just stood there while his head hung, his shoulders heaved and he wept. It must not have been more than five seconds, but it felt like eternity. Looking back maybe it felt like eternity breaking in. It felt like we were both being surprised by the power of the Spirit's presence to transform in the most unlikely of places. It felt like we had both been mugged by God's transforming love.

My testimony is that I met Jesus and he mugged me.

James didn't say anything more to me. He snorted to try to stop the snot and tears and then he grabbed the Bible and started running.

After a few paces he turned, looked me in the eye, waved the Bible at me and nodded. Then kept running.

I stood a long moment on the bridge, stunned. Then I picked up my bag, a bit dazed and continued along the overpass. As I neared the end of the bridge I saw the girl with the bag jump into an already-crowded, beaten-up sedan.

As she got in she yelled over the music to the others, "I got a bag."

James got in the car and yelled over the music, "I ... I got a Bible!?!"

They piled in and drove off, and I walked right past my bus stop.

I just kept walking.

I don't know what happened to James. But I know what happened to me that day. I encountered a Mystery that I'm still trying to come to terms with. James introduced me to Jesus (again). That the practice of love is learning to relate to others, especially our enemies, with the transformative grace God continues to show us.

James introduced me not to a safe Jesus whose message is confined to church meetings and religious gigs in stained glass ghettos (or their modern suburban warehouse equivalents). No, he introduced me to the dangerous Jesus of the Gospels who is on our streets, camouflaged as the poor, the hurting, the drug addicted, 'the lost, the last and the least of these'. The Jesus who reveals a God whose

unfailing-unarmed-love is never passive but whose Spirit is actively engaging in nonviolent, direct action to transform our lives and our world.

James introduced me to a Christ who conquers not by the sword of war, but by a towel of service. A Savior who makes holy not by exclusion, but by embrace. A cross whose offensive is not a divine demand for blood, but the divine foolishness of God's unarmed love conquering death. A gospel not of fire insurance for the afterlife, but of God's reign coming "on earth as in heaven." (Matt 6:10)

James taught me that there is nothing that shows the world what God is like more clearly than when we love our enemies. Grace is not just how God has related to us, grace is the practice of enemy love the Holy Spirit empowers us for. The practice of love is learning to relate to reality with the transformative grace God has shown us. Learning to live God's love. If God's kingdom is justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, both James and I have been collaborators in, what Dorothy Day would call "the filthy rotten system," the anti-kingdom of injustice, war and misery that dehumanizes us and others. Yet while we were enemies of what Desmond Tutu has called "God's dream for creation," God has loved us! God has been unrelenting in blessing us while we have lived like a curse. God has been unfailing in being good to us while we were stuck in hate. Jesus intercedes for us like those who were crucifying him. In Jesus it is clear: love is the only way God is transforming the world. As the Apostle John put it, "God is love." (1 John 4:16) The Cross announces and the Resurrection confirms: *only Love transforms.*

In short, we all get here *by grace.*

36

Impossible Love

by Jamie Arpin-Ricci, CJ

It is remarkable to consider that the very first time in Scripture that Jesus uses the word “love” in Matthew 5, it is to call us to love our enemies. In truth, I can’t think of anyone I really feel is my enemy. Some of us hold this command of Jesus’ with shallow nobility, considering our “enemies” in the abstract. We can rationalize minor inconveniences into a sort of “suffering.” The hard truth is, however, that those who took away prayer in school and the local gay pride parade should not/do not qualify as our enemies.

I’ve often asked myself, “What does Jesus really mean by love?” But the answer is fairly obvious. He has already shown us with his very life that the love we are to extend to our enemies is beyond sentiment, beyond intellectual acknowledgment. Jesus immediately follows His command to love our enemies with the requirement to “pray for those who persecute you.” Loving our enemies means going beyond the spiritualized over-familiarity and participating in what Jesus is calling us to do. True love means standing between our enemies and the judgment of God and interceding on their behalf. We are to be for our enemies—the very people who least deserve or desire our love—what Christ is for us. What a magnificent, terrible and beautiful image of love!

I can't ignore that what Jesus is asking of us is truly offensive: to love those who degraded us, used us, abused us and raped us. I balked at even writing those words, yet cannot help but believe that if they are not fully true than nothing else about His radical grace could be true either. It is hard enough to forgive them (and not the self-serving forgiveness of Oprah-style pop-psychology, but genuine, other-focused forgiveness), but now He wants us to love them? Surely that is too high a price to pay. And yet, Jesus' very first teaching on love begins right there, making it clear from the start where the bar is set.

For nearly a decade I have lived and served in the inner city West End of Winnipeg, Canada. Over the last two years I have had the privilege of planting and pastoring a small, unlikely church. Many members of Little Flowers Community (the name of our group) grew up and ultimately left the church out of woundedness and disillusionments. Some of them have experienced great suffering, brokenness and poverty. Abuse, rape, incest, violence and neglect: these are only a few of the all too common characteristics I heard in the stories of what many of our friends have suffered. In the face of such brutal realities, how could I come to them and ask them to love their enemies?

In the early years of our ministry in Winnipeg, I was standing in the back yard one afternoon when I saw a teenage girl, probably 14 years old, approach the back of a neighboring house. Her near full-term pregnancy seemed exaggerated on her slight, adolescent body. The house she was approaching was a known crack house, so there was little doubt as to why she was there. In stunned disbelief, I watched the girl desperately bargain for a hit. With a hand at the front of her shirt, I knew the dealer was offering to accept her body instead of the money. Hesitantly she agreed and disappeared into the building. Half an hour later, she stumbled out completely high, her unbuttoned shirt crooked over the skirt falling from her naked hip.

Few moments in my life have inspired such a rage in me as that

moment. I wanted those men to suffer, men who would be willing to rape a pregnant girl in exchange for drugs that could kill her and more likely kill her unborn child. That anger remains today, but it has been transformed, not magically or in an instant, but through the grace of God holding a mirror up to my own brokenness every day for more than a decade. If grace meant that those men deserved God's love no more or less than I, then every choice I made, no matter how small, needed to be formed by that kind of humbled submission ... with my wife, my friends, my neighbours. It called me that day to a life of discipline made possible only by the gracious Spirit of God working in and through me.

I still hate what those men did and believe they deserve to face a strict justice for their actions. However, as I started to understand Jesus' words and see His example of radical grace, I began to understand that I was also to love these men, to long for the restoration of God in their hearts and lives. Living among the poor has taught me that laws can help to limit the consequences of our sinful depravity, but it is only through hearts transformed by grace and love that the brokenness I witnessed that day (and many times since) can be restored and redeemed. And it is only when I see that my own selfishness and sin exacts the same price from Christ that I can begin to find the humility to see those men through God's eyes.

This is the cost of the love that Jesus calls us to. In the face of our suffering at the hands of our enemies, it seems truly impossible. As impossible as the words that come directly following His teachings on loving our enemies, when he commands: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And yet, it is in this very impossibility that we see the truth: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). It is only by His grace, the power of His Spirit in the unity of His Body, the Church, that we can ever hope to live out this impossible love.

However, we are not to be irresponsible with this conviction either. Our commitment to love our enemies does not mean the battered wife should welcome home her husband with open arms. It does

not mean the young man, whose grandfather is also his father through incest-rape, should trust “good old pa.” It does not mean that the recovering addict can return to all his old friends as though nothing had happened. I’ve walked with people through each one of these challenges and it was brutal, painful and I left humbled by their grace. Yes, love does forgive, but it also transforms. Things must change and healthy, clear boundaries need to be established. Yet, this love is still very costly.

This costly call of love—a love that extends even (and perhaps especially) to those who have treated us so poorly—is so often what separates the true disciples of Christ from nominal followers of convenient and comfortable religion. The status quo around us will allow us to ignore this hard truth, but the love of our enemies is not the pinnacle of faithfulness we are called to, but the very starting point of true love. For it is a love that is only possible because of the love of God, a love incarnated and given for us in the person of Jesus Christ. He did that freely for us, therefore we can do no less for Him and His kingdom.

43

A Harsh and Dreadful Thing

by Hugh Hollowell

Erica is a pain in my ass. I mean, I know that isn't a very nice thing to say, but Erica is not a very nice person, either. She is rude and mean and bigoted and, quite often, very drunk.

Erica is constantly on the brink of homelessness. Several times a year she ends up in a relationship where she gets physically abused. Somewhere along the line, she learned if she strikes first, it is harder for people to hurt her. That means Erica has become a first class abuser, in addition to being the abused.

I run a small organization called Love Wins, and our mission is to build relationships with at-risk people. On Saturdays and Sundays, we have 'Breakfast in the Park', our little meal sharing initiative where we bring coffee, sausage and biscuits to the park and share with whoever comes. We don't bring any agenda with us; we aren't feeding people to share the Gospel, but in order to demonstrate the Gospel.

When Erica shows up, however, she always has an agenda. She breaks in line. She pesters folks for money. She bitches about the color of the free jacket we gave her or that Stephanie got a nicer one than she did. If you don't watch her, she will get back in line to get

another jacket or pair of shoes for her “cousin,” which will actually end up on Martin Street, traded to the crack dealer for today’s fix.

Erica is a first class bigot, too. She yells at the Latino men she imagines are trying to cut in front of her, and she complains, loudly, about how “Mexicans” smell. Since Erica is black, this adds a delightful bit of racial tension to our little gathering.

If I’m being honest, sometimes I wish she would just go away. Erica had become my enemy, because every time she showed up I had to remind myself of what it means to love someone I don’t really want to love.

Just before Christmas, it hit a new level. Samir is a delightful Indian man who lives in that gray area between housed and homeless, depending on his job status and how successful he is at staying away from alcohol. Regardless of his housing status, he is always smiling and happy. I have seen him take shoes we have just given him and watched him give them to someone he thought needed them more. Over the years we have known him, he has moved from guest to volunteer, helping us set up the tables and unpack the vehicles.

Erica was at the head of the line. Samir was wrestling the coffee urn from the car when Erica shouted, “I don’t want that A-rab touching my food. He looks like a terrorist or something.”

I just couldn’t take it any more.

“Shut up! Just shut the hell up!” I shouted at Erica. “Samir is our guest...just like you are. If you don’t want food he has touched, you can leave.” My heart raced as the words poured out of my mouth. Did loving my enemy mean telling them to stop their own oppression?

She mumbled something under her breath; I am not sure what it was, but I am pretty sure it was not, “I love you.” She took her food and coffee and marched away. It was still and quiet after she left, for which I was thankful.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, a young widow talks to the wise old

priest about her future plans. She tells him of dreams she has had, in which she is serving the poor and tending the wounds of the sick, of showing them Christ's love. But while this excites her, she is worried that the poor will be petty or rude. What would she do if they were unappreciative? The poor can be so demanding. She is not at all sure she could handle that.

The priest tells her that, "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

I think that priest must have known some Ericas.

In the Gospels, Jesus says the entirety of Scripture can be summed up in just two statements: Love God with all you have in you and love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:38-40)

But did Jesus really mean to include the people who are constantly jerks?

Later that Saturday, when all the food was packed away and I was back at my desk, that verse popped in my head. What does it mean to love Erica as I would myself? I wish Jesus had put another verse or two in there, about how to love your neighbor when they're a jerk. Erica was forcing me to ask, "What did it mean to love a neighbor who had become an enemy?"

The next week, I saw Erica coming down the sidewalk toward where we were setting up. Samir, who was unloading the coffee, saw her first and pointed her out to me. I thought, "Oh, Boy! Here we go again ..." I had this bad feeling in my gut, like when you see the train wreck coming, but really can't do anything about it.

"Hugh," she said. "I owe you an apology. I am sorry for the way I acted last week. I was wrong, and you were right to chew me out. Can we be friends?"

I breathed a sigh of relief, and told her, "Yes, we are friends." Then she gave me a big bear hug and went to the end of the line, behind some Latinos to whom, thankfully, she said nothing.

The reality of Erica's actions revealed she was still a liar and a thief, and her presence still brings tension to the group when she shows up. And I still wonder if shouting at her was the right thing to do. But I came to realize I did not love Erica as I did myself; I only loved Erica as I wished she would be. I loved my idea of Erica. No wonder she kept disappointing me. But in loving my enemy, I could begin to call out my own dissonance.

What if loving our neighbor as ourselves, even when they become the enemy, means transcending our original impressions, so we can discover that we're more alike than we want to admit? It means calling out the oppression, even when it's not fun. But in asking for the oppression to stop, we're also calling out the value of that person. And if they are valuable, maybe we are, too.

In the Bible, John tells us that God is love, and that to know God is to know love. I am pretty sure that if the world has any hope of redemption, that redemption is only going to come about because of love. But I am also pretty sure that we cannot learn to love each other until we get to know each other.

But when that does happen, it will not be the love of dreams, but the harsh and dreadful love that only happens when real people take the risk of getting to truly know each other.

Erica and I aren't quite pals, but we are civil when we run into each other, which is often. The last time I gave her a biscuit, she said thank you and I didn't want to punch her, so maybe she has progressed more than I have. But we are working on it.