



Intimacy and God's Glory
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

Fred Rogers once said “Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.”¹

Artists, poets, comedians, and all the people endowed with the gift of crafting with words, or painting, or sculpting are able to give voice to the most profound of sentiments, the most arcane thought, and the most difficult of our soul movement to grasp and express. We are attracted to their work because they help us to reach depths and heights that we wouldn’t have access to or be able to reach on our own.

That must have been Jeremiah’s gift. He gave voice to a traumatized community suffering from the results of the Babylonian conquest and the deportation of the elite to a faraway land. War brings death, killing of men and sexual violence for the women, burning of homes and public buildings, destruction of crops and plundering of farm animals, starvation and chaos. Jeremiah wrote in a time of crisis, calling people back from the delusional optimism of false prophets to a genuine reverence for the ways of Yahweh.

The past way of life was to be no more. It was done with and there was no way to return to the way it was. There was only lament and despair. And hope, for our God is able to create new things out of chaos. God is the One that gives order to our lives and when dis-order overwhelms us, God is not too far away to restore and re-order our lives if we are ready to see and engage with God. Pandemic disruption and trauma hide longings of new life, and our God is all about Life.

There was a “new normal” for the people of Judah exiled in Babylon and for those who sought refuge and a better life in Egypt. Life would not be the same anymore. The new normal did not take shape yet: *they* needed to reinvent it and they’d better do it by reaching deep into their roots and by listening to what Yahweh God had to say. Jeremiah delivered God’s message to the people: even though you cheated on me and you broke my heart, I will be your God and you’ll be my people; you shall know me more intimately than before.² The new covenant written on the hearts of the Hebrew people required obedience to the Word of God and a renewed commitment to act according to the will of God.

With that in mind, the psalmist was able to pray: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions...Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.”

¹ Life's Journeys According to Mister Rogers: Things to Remember Along the Way

² See Jeremiah 11:10 and 22:29



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People want to “see” God. They want to know that Someone is holding them as they go through the storm. People want to know that their disrupted lives are still important in the eyes of God and that they will eventually be OK. Our old routines might not be the same anymore and future ones have not come to light just yet. The past framework that has given us a structure and a sense of control cannot be recreated and we shouldn't attempt at returning to a life that isn't there anymore. That would be a delusional and unproductive fantasy.

The high physical and emotional price exerted by the coronavirus on the global community has uncovered disturbing social and institutional dynamics we need to pay attention to. The global community has the potential of coming out of the pandemic a better people. Our hope rests on basic questions we need to answer: Who are we and what are we called to become? Who is doing the calling and how do we hear that voice? Whom do we trust and how do we build trust?

We live in a world where we do not trust one another, especially if the other does not look like me, think like me, vote like me, and believes like me. We have become so tribal and estranged from one another. We seem to engage more in cynicism than in compassion. Because of that we are quick to snarl: “What do you want?” and “Leave me alone.” We do that with our attitudes if not with our biased comments. Do Christians have a message for the world that can inspire a new normal? Are there seeds of unrestricted hospitality, merciful love, and restoring justice that need to be sown?

In his gospel account, John reports that it's the feast of Passover for the Jews and believers from many localities have traveled to Jerusalem for the annual celebration. Curiosity about Jesus, this important spiritual teacher, moves some Greeks to seek an audience with him. There is deference and they turn to Philip and Andrew, whose names are so Greek. They are in Jerusalem for the Temple sacrifice, but their attention is redirected onto Jesus. In John's mind, Jesus has become the center of God's glory replacing the Temple. But they don't go straight to him. The Greeks approach Jesus' disciples: faith is relational; we learn from one another.³

Jesus' answer does not indicate that he is going to see them. His answer is quite cryptic and unrelated to their request. One has to think hard to find a connection. Jesus talks about his glorification and the life eternal that comes after death, just like the sacrifice of a seed that falls into the soil. The seed would be useless without death: naturally, the seed's death is for life. Such a symbolism is valid for human life as well. Life-giving death is possible only when we overcome fear and make ourselves vulnerable in open trust.⁴ That doesn't come easy to us, absorbed as we are in our pain-avoiding, death-denying culture. We price control over uncertainty, known and tried over curiosity and flexibility, and predictable structure over creative experimentation.

³ John 2:35-45

⁴ John 12:27-28



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What if the Church truly tried to follow the Spirit's lead? What if the Church experimented with new and creative ministries without trying to preserve well established structure and routine? What if the Church looked at responding to the needs of the surrounding neighbors more than at maintaining a self-serving status quo? We may find ourselves with the burning desire of approaching the Bible in search of soothing and comforting words especially when crossing a difficult time. But that should not be our exclusive attitude. God sends us a Word to console us in times of trouble but also to challenge us for growth especially when we feel satisfied and content. The scope is always conversion, always openness to the promptings of the Spirit, always readiness to make room for the Word, always humility, vulnerability, and hospitality.

Listening for the Word of God should not exclusively mean wanting affirmation that we are all right, that we live in God's favor and grace. This by itself underlies a life lived in anxiety and fear of God. If you find yourself in that spot, get over it: you are a beloved child of God; God loves you beyond your wildest dreams; your past sins have long been forgiven. You don't need the Word of God to reassure you of your goodness. You are loved. You are forgiven. You are cherished.

The Word of God you may want to pay attention to is the Word that calls you to conversion because even though we are good and loved we tend to close in on ourselves, we tend to doubt our goodness and our giftedness, we tend to discard the voice of God that keeps telling us: you are more than OK, you are beloved, wanted, you are held in God's arms. Trusting God's word means letting die the voice in us and around us that keeps saying we are no good, not competent, not generous, and not enough. Do not hold on to that voice. Do not live in fear but accept God's liberating grace. Let the Holy Spirit surprise you. Let holy tears fall down your cheek and let that voice die a quick death. Dying to self is always about conversion.

Life is surely to come out of death when there is renunciation to a self-protected and change-averse life. Jesus is the one who is capable of leading those who want to see and get to know him to that place of generosity and openness where they can learn to renounce this kind of restricted life. Christianity ought to offer an alternative to a life designed after worldly values and shaped by the angry voice of the world. This is what Jesus calls eternal life, a deeper and more faithful way of living that starts now and will be accomplished one day in the presence of God.⁵

The glorification that Jesus seeks is the honor to remain generous and firm in his love commitment: he wants to carry through with his resolution to live a life of love. Such is glory: a life lived in integrity glorifies God. The Father, in turn, affirms His Son's request: God acknowledges that the Son's life is a beautiful witness to the glory of God. Think about it: when we stay faithful, when we are motivated by love, when we forgive each other's trespasses and

⁵ John 17:1-3



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pray for our enemies, when we contribute to the well-being of creation, we are glorifying God and God glorifies us.

The time has finally arrived for the whole world to be congregated around Jesus and receive the revelation of God. This revelation entails the judgment over the ways of the world and the attraction of all people to the truth of God. This is a revelation that will happen upon the ultimate sacrifice of the Lamb of God lifted high on the cross for all to *see*. And even that *seeing* needs to penetrate the veil of lies and ignorance that the world has cast over the nations. The “kind of death” the Son of Man (or the Chosen One or true humanity) will endure does not simply refer to the traumatic execution of Jesus by the Roman occupier but to the profound faithfulness and love of the one who does not retreat, recant, or become resentful even in the face of psychological pressure, social humiliation, emotional isolation, and painful death. The cross will become the universal sign of his stubborn love that will attract all people to him.

God affirms Jesus' generous love speaking straight from heaven. As people offer various interpretations of what they think they have heard, Jesus makes it unequivocally clear that the message is not for him but for them: God's glory is in the kind of life, death, and life after death that Jesus offers and we embrace. It's up to us to see Jesus and to bring others to see him. May the new normal reveal our longing to be closer to the heart of God. Amen.