

Belove to Believe
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Quinn Caldwell is the Associate Pastor at Old South Church in Boston. He was my supervisor when I was the Ministerial Intern there. At our meetings we would talk theology, pray some, and share everything from the sublime to the ridiculous about our work. Somewhere along the line, we realized that we both felt like a worship service had really succeeded if someone cried. I know that might sound oddly mercenary. In fact, in admitting it, I feel a little like that pig in the TV ad who is eating pork and asks the camera “Do you think this is wrong?” But nonetheless, I do feel strongly that tears mean that God is especially present in worship.

And it is not just Quinn and I who feel this. It is true for many pastors I know; and maybe most. From another pastor, I learned the expression “tears are a sign of the Spirit,” and he doesn’t claim to have made it up. So, this sense of God’s presence and tears is not *only* my own, although it is certainly true in my own experience. Because when I met the Holy Spirit for the first time, there were *a lot* of tears.

I was on retreat at Star Island. We were at worship in the little stone chapel there singing “Alleluia,” to different parts of Pachelbel’s canon in D. That was most of a forty-five minute worship service. We just sang Alleluia over and over again. Harmonies swirled and danced and twined together and skipped apart. It was hypnotic.

About halfway through I felt something burning hot on my cheeks. I thought I might be bleeding because it was so warm. I touched my cheek—surprised to find that my hands were raised above my head in praise posture as I did so. My face was covered in tears. Stunned, I looked around the room. Many people were crying, yet we all kept singing Alleluia, letting it wash over us and through us. By the end of the service I could hardly stand. After hugging the facilitators I straggled outside, collapsed on the ground and thanked God for the blessing of my life until somehow I found even more tears to cry in the gentle summer rain.

It’s not just tears that connect us with the Holy Spirit. It can happen with all sorts of tender and overwhelming emotions. In fact, intentionally accessing strong emotion is an entry point for certain contemplative prayer practices. Contemplative prayer is the practice of sitting with God in silence for awhile. Sometime practitioners will repeat certain phrases in their hearts, but the outward form is silent and still. Contemplative prayer practitioner and author Brian Taylor suggests beginning prayers like this:

“Recall something about which you feel deeply, or bring to mind your longing or desire for God, your gratitude, or an awareness of sin: anything that will make you vulnerable before your Creator.”¹

The idea of vulnerability before God is a terrifying prospect for many people. One of my favorite folk musicians, Greg Brown, has a song called *Lord, I Have Made You a Place in My Heart* which speaks to this fear of intimately opening oneself up to God. One part that sums it up well goes like this:

(Sing) But if I open that door, you will know I'm poor/ And my secrets are all that I own/
Oh Lord, I have made you a place in my heart/And I hope that you leave it alone.

I imagine that some of us might just prefer to get our God business over with on Sundays and be left alone the rest of the week. I would bet that's true for many of us at least once in awhile. In perfect honesty, I feel that way sometimes myself. Yet, opening our hearts to God is exactly what Jesus modeled for us to do, and was also the center of *his* spiritual practice. And Jesus showed us that by opening our hearts we eventually open our whole lives to God.

But we start with our heart, as is demonstrated by this morning's reading. Jesus says “Those who *love me* will keep my word, and my Father will *love them*, and we will come to them and *make our home with them*.”² Love leads us to follow Christ's teachings, or to “keep his word,” as he puts it. Our love of Jesus leads to God's love of us, which invites God and Jesus to make a home with us. And you know from all the love talk that the setting is our hearts; our *spiritual* cores. This is the work of Christians: to love like Jesus. And that love keeps rolling through the passage, and gathers some powerful company, too.

The Holy Spirit joins in to teach us *everything*, and remind us of all Jesus has said to us through the Gospels and the Christian tradition.³ Peace shows up as a gift from Jesus, and we are encouraged to release our troubles and fears from our hearts.⁴ Then, Jesus reminds the disciples that he will be going away and returning to them, and says “If you *loved me*, you would *rejoice* that I am going to the Father...”⁵ there's love *again* in the company of rejoicing this time... and then and *only then* does Jesus mention *belief*. He says “I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, *you may believe*.”⁶

¹ *Becoming Christ: Transformation Through Contemplation*, Brian C. Taylor, (Cowley Publications: Massachusetts, 2002) p. 15.

² John 14:23.

³ John 14:26, paraphrased.

⁴ John 14:27, paraphrased.

⁵ John 14:28.

⁶ John 14:29.

We are called to love Jesus, and to be loved by God, before we are called to believe anything. Isn't that striking? The focus of faith so often seems to be on what we believe. Yet, in today's reading, we are called into an experience before we *can* make any sort of faith claim. We are called to believe in order to love. I didn't make that word up. I learned the term 'belove' from Marcus Borg, who writes: "Most simply, 'to believe' means 'to love.' Indeed, the English words 'believe' and 'belove' are related. What we believe is what we belove. Faith is about believing God."⁷

When we believe in God, we belove God: this is the core of the Christian faith. Whereas in Islam the core may well be surrender to God, or in Buddhism the core may be non-attachment, in our faith the core is believing God and being beloved by God. When the disciples first heard this morning's reading, it was before the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection. It was a sort of foretaste of God's ongoing presence in and through Jesus even in the face of the seeming finality of death; a reminder that God's love would endure always.

It remains such a reminder for us today, and is *also* a reminder to continue to enter into God's presence with intention; and to bask in God's love so we can kindle it in our souls and hearts. It is a call to prayer. And we can enter that place of loving God best by first opening our hearts, which, frankly, can take a lot of work! We hear so many messages in life that teach us to build defenses around our hearts that it can be hard to open them to anyone, much less to God. We are so often encouraged to "go it alone," "pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps," to be the "lone ranger," to "stand out," to "lead the pack," or otherwise stand apart from others that we forget how essential it is for our human selves to relate to others. Much less how important it is for us to open ourselves up to others or to God!

I believe that this is one of the many reasons God gives us one another with whom to take up the work of Jesus. So we can help one another to more readily and deeply enter those places where we are open to God's transformation and love. Because in actively seeking to belove God, we find ourselves believing as God does. As Borg puts it: "To be faithful to God means not only to love God, but to love that which God loves—namely, the neighbor, and indeed the whole of creation."⁸ That's what Jesus did on earth and continues to do now; and it is what he calls us to do, too. To be Christian is not only to venerate Christ, which is indeed well and good, but also to seek his mind and heart in our own, and to learn to love and live as he did.

So friends, in this final Sunday of Easter, I am calling you to join me in taking a risk. Join me in making yourselves vulnerable to God's presence. Instead of reaching down to pull up your bootstraps, join hands with your neighbor in prayer. Risk praying so deeply that you don't know where your believing stops and God's believing begins. Risk an openness to the Holy Spirit that

⁷ *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, Marcus J. Borg, (Harper One: New York, 2003), p.40.

⁸ *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, Marcus J. Borg, (Harper One: New York, 2003), p.34.

is so total that your tears flow like hot streams—maybe even in public. Not just on Sunday mornings, or in Sunday prayers, but every day. Because *then* our hearts lead our minds into a richer union and a more complete being. *Then* our love leads our faith. *Then* we believe to believe, and our whole lives become radically open to God; and our lives overflow with hypnotic, swirling Alleluias, and we all enter the mind and heart of Jesus. Amen?

John 14:23-29

23Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. 25”I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. 28You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.