

Lent 3  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

February 28, 2016  
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## **Of Love and Suffering**

This is installment 3 of five in a Lenten Sermon. In installment one we discussed how our normal way of thinking is inadequate for the big questions of life. Called dualistic thinking, it is lower-order thinking, and it works on the basis of categories, labels and distinctions. It is largely driven by the ego. The ego derives its sense of self from the distinctions dualistic thinking prescribes, but the ego cannot truly love selflessly, for to do so requires the death of the rule of the ego—which it cannot do. To approach the great questions of life from a dualistic point of view is guaranteed failure—and in the end, that is a good thing. The first Lenten discipline, then, was to surrender.

In installment two we discussed the need for another way of thinking. If dualistic thinking is inadequate for the task of approaching the mystery of life, then another way must be found. That other way is called unitive thinking. It is higher-order thinking, and instead of working on distinctions and labels, it works on the great big picture. Instead of dividing it unites. This is what our spirits can do, and from this place in us we can love, for the spirit is capable of selfless love. The second Lenten discipline is to look for the bigger picture.

Now we pick up the two great paths into unitive thinking.

Many years ago when I was a boy my father gave me a very special Christmas present. It was my very first pocket knife. He told me that I was old enough to have one now, and that I was to care for it, and be very careful not to lose it. I was overcome with joy! I felt so grown up, I felt like a big boy, and I committed myself to caring for that little pocket knife.

But what are pocket knives for, after all, if they stay in your pocket all the time? Later that very day I was out in the yard playing with my knife in the dirt. My mind was distracted for a moment, and when I turned to pick up my knife it was gone. I sifted through the dirt endlessly, I tried to retrace my steps to see if I had left it somewhere else. All my efforts were in vain. I had lost that precious symbol of my budding maturity on the very day I had received it.

I gained a greater gift that day than a pocket knife. I learned something about responsibility and the consequences of irresponsibility. A great deal of humility when I had to admit to my father that I had lost his gift to me. He was a good father; he did not

chide or scold. He merely helped me tease out the important lessons from that experience. I have never forgotten it.

Unitive thinking is like that. We are given something, and then, after the gift, we strive to learn the wisdom of the gift. The unitive experience is the gift. Thomas Merton relates a powerful experience of unitive insight as one of the turning points of his life.

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”<sup>1</sup>

Here is another record of such an event.

Wonder I've done it 20-year's worth, I know my craft.  
The wine to the Deacon, the paten with the hosts up where the faithful see.  
I'd said the prayers, genuflected, crossed and trussed it up for all,  
And then...My God, what is happening to me?

The paten shimmers with the holy bread, seems weightless on my fingertips!  
Through tears I see that God is on the plate.  
Not as like flour or oil, nor (though almost) that they are God,  
But that they are in God, and so am I, and we.

Breathless now, the words come forth from deep within,  
Hard at first, for words do not come quick from such dark parts;  
But they come, sure and sound, more real and round,  
And deeper than ever in 20 years--"The gifts of God...take them!..."

Here, then is the wonder, that God has come to us  
In the stuff of our own hands--our own bodies, that we

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<sup>1</sup> Merton, Thomas. *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*. Image, 2009, 153.

Might see and know ourselves to be of the stuff of God.

Silently I wonder, “Am I holding the plate, or is the plate holding me?”<sup>2</sup>

(Don't tell me you haven't had similar experiences, because I know you have. You may have intentionally forgotten them, for they are often extremely threatening to the ego, but you have had them, nonetheless.)

Unitive thinking is the wisdom of the gift. This way of thinking is almost always the product of one of two things: either great love, or great suffering—which are, really, flip sides of the same unitive experience. Great love and great suffering lift us out of the power of the ego and give us our true selves.

For the Christian there is no greater example of great love and great suffering than the Cross. Here God shows his love for us in joining us in our brokenness and our mortality. Here God takes the full brunt of human brokenness and sinfulness willingly and redemptively. The Cross is not the product of ego, but of Spirit. The Cross is not the product of divisions and labels, but of infinite and unconditional love. The Cross, then, must be the key for Christians to understand unitive thinking. How do we live the wisdom of the Cross?

We like to be in love. It's a great feeling. All is wonderful, all is beautiful, and the object of your love seems to make it so. There is nothing we wouldn't do for our loved one. Everything is about them, sometimes to the unhealthy neglect of yourself—right? Falling in love launches us into unitive thinking.

We don't like to suffer, yet true love always involves suffering. In Honduras one year a teen mother brought her week-old firstborn to be seen by the doctors. The child had a serious cleft pallet. He couldn't nurse, and the poor mother was distraught on how to feed her child. She was suffering enormously because of love, and though she never would have wished the condition on her child, seeing that he had it, she was going to suffer for love for him. When love will not suffer for the loved one it is not love. Real love requires a kind of self-forgetfulness that is not self-neglect. It is a focus on the other and their best in a scenario where you become an instrument of that wellbeing, and nothing more.

Some suffering isn't so obviously connected to love. We suffer when bad things happen to us with no one to blame. We can suffer selfishly: “Why did this happen to me?” “I don't deserve this!” This is dualistic thinking, inadequate to the task, and it only separates us from others and makes us bitter. We can suffer selflessly. Even when we do

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<sup>2</sup> prm, August, 2013

not understand and the pressure of the suffering presses us down into the dust, when we have nowhere to look but up and we cannot turn our heads to do so; when suffering comes to us to that degree and we quietly surrender to it, knowing that it is all we can do, and allowing it to break us, then, too, we are carried out of our egos and given our true selves. To be broken open by suffering is to love the whole greater than the part, to know that you are part of a greater whole. We absorb the pain because it is finally the only thing to do, knowing that the pain is not the opposite of the joy, but it's companion, both parts of a bigger picture in the mind and heart of God. This is to be carried outside ourselves and think unitively. This is to share the suffering of the Cross.

This is our third Lenten discipline. The first was to surrender, the second was to look for the bigger picture, and the third is to embrace your suffering. Keep your eye on the Cross:

Where is it that you hurt for love's sake? What is so precious to you that you are willing to hurt to continue to hold it? Is it truly a love worthy of such suffering? If not, then release it, mourn it, and move on. Often this is important, for our reasons for hurting are our own doing, clinging to hurts and offenses, and worn-out ways of thinking that no longer explain your experience. But if so, then embrace it willingly, and out of love. Let yourself go to love as God loves, even as you know you will suffer for it.

Do you hurt without an obvious love? Leonard Cohen wrote a quatrain that speaks to this:

Ring the bells that still can ring,  
 Forget your perfect offering.  
 There is a crack in everything.  
 That's how the light gets in.<sup>3</sup>

Embrace the pain. Do not allow yourself to become bitter. Trust the pain, surrender to it. Allow it to break you open. Only your ego says you will die, and from its perspective it speaks the truth, but I am here to tell you that the real you, the true you will not die. You will find a life greater than you can ever imagine.

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen, Leonard. "Anthem." *The Future* (1992).