

BodyLife Past Article Archive

In Exactly the Same Way

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He didn't keep it to himself. It might have been impossible - even for God!

To hold something so beautiful for himself was unthinkable.

He had enjoyed it forever in the divine relationship of Father, Son and Spirit. He wanted to share it so much that he made a universe to house those he would create to be its object.

Genuine love is like that. Part of reveling in its delights is to share it with others. When you really touch it, just try and contain it if you can. If God didn't, how do you think you'll pull it off?

The earliest believers transformed by the cross couldn't, even when they were being beaten with whips or battered with stones. When they were commanded to silence they responded, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

They had been touched by the greatest force in the universe and they were unable to keep it in, even when they knew it would cost them dearly. Such is the nature of God's love. As I said at the outset, there is nothing more powerful in all the world and once you've experienced God's kind of love, there will be no way for you to keep it to yourself.

The Wellspring of Love

I'll have to admit that I grew up viewing love as an onerous chore. Loving others meant I had to be nice to them, even when I didn't want to. Lacking compassion, I still thought I had to act compassionately at least toward other believers.

Trying to share God's love with the world was a bit more confusing and often embarrassing. We knew we were supposed to share the gospel with them, but often we talked about them as enemies meriting of God's judgment. Most attempts to share God's love were driven more by our feeling condemned if we didn't, than out of genuine concern.

Because our motives lay more with our needs than theirs, we weren't really loving them. That was probably more obvious to them than it was to us. Instead of feeling loved, they felt exploited by those who want to get another notch on their belts.

Jesus didn't call us to convert the world, but to simply love others the way we've been loved. As long as we

act out of obligation toward others we will fall far short of what Jesus asked us to do. But he also knows that we cannot love effectively if we have not been loved extravagantly ourselves. That may seem selfish at first look, but until we trust our Father to care for us, we will constantly use the people around us to meet our own needs and preferences.

The unfolding of love in our lives can only begin with the wellspring of love, the Father himself! ?This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins? (1 John 4:10). Once we experience love as God defines it we will not be able to keep from sharing it with others as it has been shared with us. True love does not give with any thought what it gains in return.

Where God is generous with you, you can be generous with others. Where God affirms your worth in him, you won't seek its substitute with others. Where you know God overlooks your flaws; you'll overlook them in others.

Jesus left us with one command: to love one another as we have been loved. Paul even placed love on a higher plane than spiritual knowledge, noting that knowledge can easily puff us up whereas love will build up others (I Corinthians 8:1) He thought it absurd that believers would trample those for whom Christ died over disputes about what foods to eat or days to celebrate. But it happened in his day and through the course of history because we've made Christianity more about right doctrine than loving others.

Healthy Relationships

You will soon find that your security in God's love and your awareness of his unlimited patience with you will redefine the other relationships in your life.

Instead of demanding that others conform to what you think is right, you will find yourself letting others have their own journey. By no longer manipulating them to what you think is best you can allow them the same freedom God gives you. You will let them choose their own course based on nothing but the clarity of truth as you understand it and the willingness of their conscience. It is the task of the Holy Spirit to convict, not yours.

Instead of despising people who are broken by sin you will be touched by the depth of bondage that holds them captive. You will also see more clearly how the Father is responding to them and then know how you can. Sometimes that means you'll stand back and let the consequences of sin take their course as the father did with his prodigal son. At other times it means you'll jump into the mess with them and help them find God's way out.

Instead of saying what you think people want to hear, you'll look for ways to be gently honest with them. Human love seeks people's comfort at the expense of truth. God's kind of love seeks people's comfort in the midst of truth. He doesn't avoid the difficult moment or hold his peace just to be nice. As you

experience that in your own relationship with him you'll find yourself unable to be disingenuous with people.

Finally, by looking to God as the resource for your needs you will find yourself not overloading your friendships with expectations that are easily disappointed. So much ill-will exists in God's church because of something said or not said; something done or not done. We either withdraw with hurt feelings or work even harder to manipulate others to do what we want.

By vesting all of our hope in God's ability to meet our needs we will not need to force our friends to do it. I know God will often use other believers to extend his gifts and graces to me, but now I also know I don't get to choose the vessel he uses. In other words, I always look for how God is revealing himself to me through other believers, but I don't trick myself into thinking it has to come from a specific person I want him to use.

Disappointed expectations destroy relationships because we look to others in ways God wants us to look to him. Such expectations set us up for enduring frustration. However, when we give up our expectations of people, we'll find God using some of the most unlikely people to lend us a hand. Our frustration will yield to gratefulness at however, whenever and through whomever God uses others to touch us or us to touch others.

A Safe Harbor

Instead of trying to fix people in crisis, love will call us to graciously lend them our support. We will be able to offer insights as fellow-strugglers in the process, not experts with pat answers. When you live like that you will be a safe place for people to be encouraged in their trials and for them to discover what it means to rely on God in the midst of it.

People who serve the illusion of a demanding God will be unwittingly destructive to people in pain instead of helpful. When I thought I had to work so hard to earn God's acceptance, I thought loving people meant I had to push them to do so as well. When someone came to me in crisis, I would tell them what they were doing wrong and encourage them to try harder. No wonder people in pain shied away from me.

I discovered that a few years ago as I was sitting in a roomful of people going through some very painful life experiences: lost jobs; family crisis, desperately ill relatives; chronic diseases, and drug dependencies. Thinking out loud I observed that it seemed to be a tough time for God's people. A few years ago, I noted, that most believers I knew were living the bliss of the American dream - stable families, healthy children, rising incomes.

Knowing glances shot around the room. "Should we tell him?" someone finally asked.

Tell me what?

"Back then you were not a safe person for people who were hurting. You had an answer for everything and it usually added to people's feelings of condemnation and inadequacy. But the difficulties you experienced in the last few years have changed you. People sense your compassion and your trust that the Father will sort it out with them in his time."

If all the pain I've gone through opens that door for others, I can truly say it has been worth it. But again, this is nothing I set out to change. Somehow some of the patience God had poured into me had splashed out on to others without my notice.

I am amazed at what love will call people to do, and they won't even think it a sacrifice. Recently I met a woman from the Midwest who had been divorced when her husband told her he was gay, that he had AIDS and that he wanted to live with his lover. A few years later as the disease progressed, she felt compassion for her former husband and felt God wanted her to help care for him as the disease worsened.

She did just that. With her husband's permission she moved back in, not as wife but as nurse, and cared for him as the disease progressed. I can't imagine what it took for her to give of herself in this way, and don't think her obedience should become a standard for others, but she talked about it as one of the greatest experiences of her life. What's more, after his death she took in other AIDS patients for the next few years to share God's love with them as well.

The Excellent Way

Without God's love filling our hearts, we'll end up hurting people despite our best intentions. For years I've heard of congregations doing ?Jericho marches? around property they needed to expand their facility to reach their neighborhood more effectively for the kingdom. I heard one pastor telling how one of their next-door neighbors sold them the property they needed after they went out on a Sunday evening and marched around it singing and praying that the owners would sell.

A few years later I got a look from the other side of those curtains. Our new neighbors were not Christians and let us know in no uncertain terms that they didn't want that ?Jesus stuff crammed down their throats.? We assured them we would not. As we got to know them better we found out why. Their previous home had been located next to a church facility and according to them the people there had been obnoxious in their attempts to make them move. They parked in their driveway, trampled their flowers, and even one night marched around the house chanting. As an elderly couple it had scared them half to death.

They had held their ground for many years thereafter unwilling to give in. When they finally did move they were embittered at how they had been treated and had rejected any sense of God's reality.

Over the course of the next thirteen years, however, we got to know them, mostly by taking them their mail when it had mistakenly ended up in our box. They mentioned one day how much they appreciated some article I'd written for the local paper and our conversations more frequently turned to spiritual things. They were interested but still cautious.

Do you know what finally opened the door? One day I found out they were too ill to get their paper any more and had to wait until the evening when their son would come over and get them their paper. I told them I'd be happy to get theirs every morning when I got mine. For the next four years, until we moved, it was our family project. It wasn't any big deal to us and yet it touched them deeply.

I did get to share the life of Jesus with them and was even asked to preside at the husband's funeral when he passed away a couple of years ago. They were not "missionary projects" to us, they were friends and neighbors whom we cared about.

Jesus said the same thing. "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching" (John 14:23).

I know that can be taken two ways and for most of my life I've followed the wrong one. I thought Jesus was saying if I really loved him I would keep all of his commands, as if the keeping was proof of the loving. But the rest of his actions and teaching prove otherwise. Those who love will find themselves obeying his ways, as if the keeping was only the natural result of loving.

The difference is critical, for it determines where we'll invest our efforts - in keeping or loving. We know our best efforts at keeping will never be enough but the transformation that love brings to our lives will help us live like Jesus in the world.

That's why he told us to love - exactly the same way he would love us.

Until we know he does? we can't.

Once we fully know he does? we can't help ourselves not to.

This is love: not that we loved God,
but that he loved us and sent his Son
as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

I John 4:10

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