

God's unconditional love, Billy Joel, and the healing power of centering prayer

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Speaking like a mother gathering her children, the Lord God poetically comforts the people of Israel in Babylonian exile. Through the prophet Isaiah, God announces a love for the people that is without qualification, and promises to bring them back home, back to God:

*But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob,
and formed you, O Israel:
Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name: you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
in the rivers you shall not drown.
When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned;
the flames shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in return for you.
Because you are precious in my eyes
and glorious, and because I love you,
I give men in return for you
and peoples in exchange for your life.
(Isa. 43:1-5; New American Bible).*

For years, I have read this passage and experienced solace in these words of assurance that God speaks through Isaiah: You are mine; I love you. This love song from our creator to Israel and to all peoples expresses a deep divine tenderness that stirs up hope in the beloved.

At times I have been able to embrace the freedom this passage invites. At other times, I have moved away from that freedom toward seeking salvation by my own efforts; into my being creeps that idea that I have to make myself worthy of being loved by God. In fact, it was not until Kathleen Chesto led our parish mission in February 2006

that I realized how much I have vacillated between trusting God's unconditional love for me and trying vainly to impress God with my virtue and my accomplishments.

What began to remove my blinders? In her three mission talks in our parish, author, retreat leader, and woman of faith Kathy Chesto used phrases from Isaiah and from the Billy Joel song "Just the Way You Are."¹ Billy Joel probably wrote this song about someone he loved deeply. But as art does, the song has a life of its own. For me, as Chesto used it in our parish mission, the song became a wonderful restatement of God's love for Israel and all humanity as described in Isaiah 43:1-5. God's Spirit used Billy Joel's words to begin to recreate me.

As Chesto recited, "Don't go changing, to try and please me; ... I'll take you just the way you are," and then quoted phrases from Isaiah 43:1-5, the realization dawned on me that I had spent most of my Christian life trying to change myself into someone whom God would find pleasing—and almost always feeling that I didn't measure up. Then Chesto said, "What will it take till you believe in me / The way that I believe in you?" and I thought, Oh my gosh! I have spent so much energy, prayer, and anxiety trying to get God to love me by making myself worthy—when all the time, like the father of the prodigal son, God has been standing on the porch, waiting for me to turn toward home to receive and celebrate this love relationship.

Chesto then quoted the line "I said I love you and that's forever / And this I promise from the heart / I could not love you any better / I love you just the way you are." Caught up in the power of the conviction in her voice, I was overwhelmed by God's unconditional love. In my heart I began to be freed of the temptation to try to earn God's love, and then joy flooded in, with the assurance that God does love me. This promise is forever. The psalmist's song welled up in me: "Bless the LORD, O my soul! Let all that is within me bless God's holy name!" (Ps. 103:1).

The more Chesto recited the lines from Isaiah and Billy Joel, the more my sense of unworthiness before God melted away. As she talked, my tears flowed and my blinders started to fall. I began to sing "Just the Way You Are," imagining that God was singing it to me. Afterward, in odd moments I would be overcome with joy as God's love began to radiate within me. I would sometimes pray

aloud, wherever I was. Folks in the grocery checkout lines sometimes gave me funny looks, but I just kept praying. People would ask why I was so full of joy, and I would tell them. Some seemed to wonder, what are you on?

During and after our parish mission, my false belief that salvation is something that I must earn began to diminish. I began to sense God's offer of salvation as utterly gratuitous. At times I knew, with every ounce of my being, that all I had to do was accept this gift of love and forgiveness. As this healing happened, I found myself able to forgive more easily. Moreover, when tempted to confess the sins of other people (gossip), I found it relatively easy to turn away from this evil. Further, I began to understand that only God can heal the human heart. As Saint Teresa of Ávila was fond of saying, "*Sólo Dios basta*" (only God satisfies).

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After the parish mission, as Lent approached, I asked myself what I would give up. The answer came easily: I would give up rushing through the day, skipping prayer, doing too much, being impatient, trying to prove others wrong so that I could be right, negativity, and my multi-tasking—which often puts things before people. I felt God calling me to give up these forms of sin that threaten to obscure my awareness of God's

offer of unconditional love. The habit of acting as though it is all up to me dies hard. I am still tempted to believe that if I work really hard in the vocations to which God has called me, as husband, father, and pastoral associate, I might have a shot at salvation.

As I was letting go of some things in Lent, I needed to embrace (or be embraced by) others: grace, seeing God in all things and all people, waiting on the Lord, stopping to smell the flowers, looking at people when I speak with them (my perpetual multi-tasking tends to pull me into doing two to three other things as I speak to someone on the phone or in person; at such times, I do not see as God sees). Most of all, I decided that I needed and wanted to go out of my way to play, to celebrate this love of God with my wife, children, and all those I encountered. By *play*, I mean relishing

Jesus' gift of abundant life (John 10:10) to us right now, right here—a eucharistic approach to life, lived in thanksgiving to God for everything.

How does the experience I have recounted connect with the practice of centering prayer? Little did I know that God had already been leading me toward these moments of joy by exposing me to centering prayer. This approach to prayer had already begun to change me, simply by asking me to sit in the presence of God's love. My healing had already begun through this prayer practice, in which my anxiety lessened and my trust in God deepened. Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk, calls centering prayer "divine therapy": I just sit in the presence of God and am enveloped by divine love. How? By breathing in a sacred word for God and breathing it out, praying the Jesus prayer, or breathing in the divine word and breathing out a virtue or gift in which I want to grow.

My practice of centering prayer has developed over time. When I started, I would set my watch for thirty minutes and breathe in a word for God and then breathe out what I wanted more of: love, peace, joy, faith, hope, wisdom, for example. Frankly, it felt like I was doing all this work, and the result was a breathing marathon. I think I was expecting something to happen. Finally my watch would beep and I would say, "Thank God that's over." But then I would just sit quietly for five or ten minutes more, and breathe. Over time, I realized that it was really in those five or ten minutes after my watch beeped that I was doing centering prayer, just being with God. I quit setting my watch and started just sitting with God.

When I teach centering prayer, people sometimes tell me, "But I am not doing, seeing, or hearing anything." Exactly. That is the goal of this prayer: to do nothing as I am embraced by the divine presence, and to allow myself to be loved as a child is held and loved by a parent. Too often, I had come to prayer as if it were a vending machine: I put something in and expected that God would dispense something. Sometimes prayer does work that way, yet the experience of the saints and mystics—and even my own experience—has taught me that prayer can be so much more.

At times I have turned to God in centering prayer when I felt that I was in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the grip of fear as I

faced the cross, I prayed. What I received during and after this prayer was rarely an answer or a quick fix. Rather, what I received is what I think Jesus may have experienced, heard, and felt in Gethsemane from his Father, the assurance that “I am with you. I love you and you are mine.” My trust in what I cannot see grows, and I walk more by faith and less by sight. I have renewed faith that God is truly with me, no matter what happens.

According to a Gandhian principle of meditation, you become what you meditate on. Eastern Christian traditions teach that we have been created by God to return to God through a process Orthodox Christians call “theosis” or “divinization,” that is, of ultimately becoming one with God through transforming grace. Apophatic or *via negativa* (way of negation) prayer, such as centering prayer and the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of

God, have mercy on me, a sinner”), is a particular emphasis in the Eastern church, though there are important strands in Christian tradition in the West as well.

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As 1 John 3:2 says, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, *we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*” Another way to name the experience of centering prayer is as “common

union” or “communion” with God. What is this communion like? Again I quote 1 John: “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (4:16). If God is love, and we remain in God through prayer, we can become this love for God and others. In doing so, we become like God.

In the summer of 2005, Marlene Kropf and I organized a Mennonite-Catholic experience of centering prayer in northern Indiana. We gathered for six periods of prayer, three in Catholic churches and three in Mennonite churches. It was a remarkable experience of the body of Christ Mennonite and Catholic.

Through these prayers we shared in Christ’s one body, and perhaps someday we can share one communion, because ecumenism is not an addition to the mission of the gospel but is at its heart. We had a social after each session and encouraged people to chat with

someone from the other tradition. Participants commented: “Why have we waited so long to do this?” “This is wonderful!” “Let’s do more of this.” “I have never met a Mennonite before.” “I have not known many Catholics.”

Many participants were doing centering prayer for the first time. We developed this prayer series out of a set of tapes, “Healing Our Violence through the Journey of Centering Prayer,” by Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who founded the Center for Contemplation and Action, and Thomas Keating. In each session we played or summarized part of one of the tapes, taught a bit about this way of prayer, and then invited the Mennonites, Catholics, and others gathered, to try it for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then we discussed our experience in pairs and in the larger group. Some participants felt closer to God, a deeper trust, a sense of peace; some found in this new (to them) form a kind of prayer that they wanted to enter into again.

Where have these experiences brought me? To the hope and expectation that I will continue to seek communion with God and all people through this divine healing love in prayer. At times, I still find myself vacillating between trying to earn my salvation and knowing that it is an utter gift, to be celebrated and shared. I am thankful to have seen God’s love in Marlene Kropf and many Mennonites who I *know* are my brothers and sisters in Christ. Better yet, they have become friends with whom I journey in prayer and mission toward a fuller realization of God’s reign, in which one day God will be all in all, and all creation will know the fullness of God’s promise of love found in Isaiah: “I have called you by name: you are mine.... I love you.”

Note

¹ Billy Joel, *The Stranger*, 1977; re-released 1998. Search the lyrics for “Just the Way You Are” at http://www.billyjoel.com/frameaset_lyrics.html.

About the author

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