

A Letter of Consolation -- or --
For my friend, who can't quite
believe God loves her

Wedgewood Baptist Church,
Charlotte, North Carolina
Delbridge E. Narron
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Lessons: Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

A reading from Lionel Blue's Daily Readings

Dear friend,

You aren't the only one you know. Not the only one who doesn't quite believe that God loves you. I have lots of friends who can't quite believe that God loves them. Or that anyone loves them for that matter. I have lots of friends who can't quite love themselves, maybe. But then, maybe, none of us is entirely successful at that; at loving ourselves all the time, or most of the time, or believing that God loves us.

I know what it's like. I don't know how you feel. Not exactly. But I know what it's like to not know for sure that you're loved. To be uncertain about the affections of another. I know what it's like to have been abandoned. I haven't been abandoned like you have. And you haven't been abandoned like I have. Maybe life is unique to each of us though. And if we had to have had the very same experiences to understand each other, then nobody would ever understand anyone else.

And maybe nobody does understand anyone else. Not entirely. But we can connect enough with our similar experiences at least to have some sympathy for one another. And so, I know what it's like. All of us have been abused, taunted, hated, used. And I don't know exactly how you feel or what you've been through. But I can cry with you anyway. And I can grieve with you all the things you should have had and didn't. I can mourn the loss of things you never had -- and things I never had. I can feel the anguish and pain of the uncertainty of love and the injury of conditional love.

And I can understand -- because I have been there too -- why you can't quite believe that God loves you. I can understand, because I have felt the dark trembling uncertainty also, of God's apparent absence, of God's impossible requests. Leave your country and go to some unknown land, God told Abram and Sarai. Reward or punishment? It certainly didn't make Abram and Sarai more comfortable. I can understand that. I can understand Elijah hiding on Mount Horeb wearing Groucho Marx glasses, hoping that no one will recognize him from the picture on Jezebel's "Wanted Dead or Alive" posters -- seeking in vain the voice of God on God's own holy

mountain. From the beginning of faith history, people have wondered about God's love on occasion.

What we're told by everybody else doesn't help. Some folks tell us that we aren't pretty. Others tell us that we aren't alluring. Some tell us we aren't smart. But worst of all, perhaps, are the church folks who have tried to tell us that we aren't worthy -- as if anyone might be. As if any one of us might be qualified to cast that first stone. Jesus had a way about him -- of erasing the lines between those folks who thought themselves righteous and the poor woman caught in adultery.

There's no difference, he said. If one person gets stoned, then everybody gets stoned. Then it could only be fun if he wasn't talking about rocks. And every single one of them dropped their weapon and walked away with their heads down. And he loved the woman. He did. Without so much as an "Are you sorry?" he forgave her and sent her on her way asking her to not sin -- that is to say, not to forget about God again.

A man named Nicodemus came to Jesus once. "Unless one is born anew, one cannot see the realm of God," Jesus said apropos of nothing, really, that Nicodemus had said, or at least so it seemed. "How can someone be born who is old? Can anyone enter their mother's womb a second time and be born?", Nicodemus was puzzled. Jesus must be kidding.

Jesus proceeded with a rather remarkable statement. "...Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, one cannot enter the realm of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

There are folks in the world that report their experience of having been born like this, born anew, born from above, born again, as having happened immediately, instantaneously. You and I, my friend -- we have not had so easy a birth, have we? God has labored long and hard with us; years have gone by and we are still being born in the spirit. God's cries of labor echo through the womb and the world. People have opposed our births and placed obstacles in our way. Our struggle to survive has sometimes preempted our process of birth. But God has not given up, and love's labor is not lost. We will continue to be born anew. The Spirit of God is a fruitful, multiplying Spirit. The process of birth continues.

I can understand how it would be easy to forget; to forget that God suffers with you, my friend; to forget that God struggles with you to give you new birth and new life; to forget that God loves you. I can understand, because I have -- all of us have forgotten as well. At different times in our lives, in different circumstances, we have all let ourselves play God -- pretending that we are in ultimate control even of whether God loves us. We have all believed that God's love depends on us rather than God. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But we were wrong. God's love is from God -- and it matters not one little bit whether we want it, accept it, return it, or say thank you for it. God loves us because God loves us -- not because we deserve it. How many of us love anyone else because we owe it to them? God loves us because that's who God is.

But I can see where it would be hard to remember. When our own parents abuse and mistreat us. When our friends betray or desert us. When our children rebel and dissolve before our eyes. When our very bodies seem to turn against us, bringing illness, injury and decay. I can comprehend the emptiness of forgetting that God loves us. When we feel unlovely and unlovable. When the excruciating pain of life builds and builds until it seems unbearable. When the grief of unutterable loss overcomes us. When even the voice of God's people, the Church, utters condemnation -- when we see them gathered around with stones in hand, ready - eager to put us out of our misery -- hoping to quell their own feelings of unworthiness by killing us for ours.

I can understand why it might be easier to believe that God wanted far more to punish than to love; how it might be tempting to think that God judges and finds us unworthy and condemns us -- all beyond our comprehension or control. I know how it feels to not feel welcome even at church -- because I have felt unworthy too. I have felt abandoned, deserted, judged, betrayed, bereaved, ill, naked and imprisoned. And because of that, I can ache for you now as you feel those awful feelings and search for God among the bare and ruined choirs where once the sweet birds sang.

I know, because I have heard them before, that words cannot change the emotionless depth of doubt. Nevertheless, we all need to be reminded. We all need to hear the words again and again. That "God so loved us all, people, animals, trees -- For God so loved the world that God gave God's only child, a son, that whoever believes in that son should never perish but have eternal life, life abundantly. For God sent Jesus into the world, not to condemn us, but that through him the whole world might be redeemed, transformed, renewed."

I know that these words will not change what you feel inside. I know that none of us can control how we feel altogether. But love letters help. And those words are one of many love letters from God. And I know that I can help in some small way -- by mixing my tears with yours. Crying for your pain and mine, joining with you, together, all of us, facing all that comes. Sharing joy and sorrow, pain and celebration. Remembering that all of our lives are not spent alone in introspection. Mourning abates to make room for joy. Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. Jesus came not to condemn you but to reclaim you.

And when you are able to hear them, and know them to be true, the words are here for you. I love you. And I know in the deepest places of my heart that God loves you too. You are worthy, because God has made you worthy. You are loved, because God loves you. Even though you are not quite able to believe it right now, God loves you always and more than words can ever say.

AMEN.