

A letter to my beloved son who, like me, struggles with what it means to be broken in a broken Church:

To you, my beloved child, I wish the grace, consolation and peace of God who is, like me, a Father and, like you, a Son. As we have shared many times, God abides with the Son, and there with them exists a perfect though not unchallenged love we call the Holy Spirit. To this you have only ever replied, “I know,” which draws a smile from me every time.

Your letter expressed doubts about the Trinity, and the importance and impact of those relationships on your life. What I call a Mystery, you have called “a myth” and “no help” in the face of the terrors of mind and heart and the failures of community that you have experienced. For what good is God’s accompaniment modeled by the Trinity, if one cannot feel it through the overpowering aches of depression and the disconnection and isolation of loneliness? I understand this deeply; more than you might know. I have lived with anger and fear, self-doubt and the struggle for meaning as long as I can remember.

Yet, your battle with depression and loneliness, the struggle for your very precious existence, has challenged me more than my own struggles. Some say these things are a symptom of your generation, casting blame on or dismissing you as the anxious ones buried in electronics. Others point fingers at the pandemic, perhaps because this is easier than actively seeking to understand and accompany. Your doubts and fraught relationship with our Church tempt those of us who minister to summon answers from our texts and practices. Answers are mere platitudes when depression and loneliness set in. The fundamental separation of one person from another and the dis-ease of community - these demons are old and skilled, my beloved. Jesus himself waged the war against them.

There are two parables recorded in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Mark (5:21-43), one told within the context of the other, that remain vital examples of God’s work to disrupt the struggles that you and so many in your generation live daily. Little doubt that by now you have refamiliarized yourself with these stories since your active and voracious mind leaves no citation unexamined. The healings of Jairus’ daughter and the woman with the hemorrhage focus us on the body of the person and, ultimately on the Body of Christ. They point to Jesus’ work to restore health to the physical manifestations of illness and the separation that culture, custom and social relations impose on those who suffer. Like mental illness, these are personal maladies with public consequence.

Then let us speak first of consequences, beloved. Jairus’ family is secure. As an official of the synagogue, Jairus is the patriarch of his family and his loved ones have socioeconomic advantage and religious privilege. Tragedy still comes for them. The daughter’s illness is a crisis that breaks into that security and forces them to seek the accompaniment of the very figure that threatens Jairus’ livelihood. Jesus has challenged religious and political authority, and so Jairus’ last chance faith and invitation to Jesus will bear future consequences for his family. In contrast, the woman who interrupts Jesus’ ministerial summons already bears the consequence of illness. Her marginalization is complex. Her extended bleeding means that she is both ritually impure (unable to approach the altar of the Lord) and socially isolated (unable to approach the clean and

undefiled) through no fault of her own. In either case, a lack of social freedom and limited relationships are the consequence of protracted illness.

As you have fallen into the grip of clinical depression, your own social freedom and the relationships you had and those you might have had are the casualties of this war. They are profound. Your thin relationships cause you anguish for their lack of depth and for their scarcity. They have stoked our worry and sadness. It is intolerable to witness your pain and unacceptable to know that it compounds your loneliness.

I sometimes think of it as ritual impurity that the Church attributes to you and your peers. You have said often that you do not *feel* and struggle to *know* the Church as a loving community. The messages you hear so clearly from Church and about Church tell you about who is left out rather than who might be invited in. The preaching you hear rarely speaks to your lived experience. Over time you have discovered language for complex historical realities and matched that language to your own life and that of your friends. You have discovered the Church's complicity in ways you name as colonial, racist, heterosexist, elitist, capitalist, transphobic, agist, masculinist, clerical and on, and on. You are right. Just as the two diseases in Mark's story implicate the socio-political dynamics that separate people, your critiques are valid and bear the pain and weight of history. Broken social relations are not the end of the story. Jesus has the final word. I hope someday you might believe that and build a way of being Church in the world and ministering to and accompanying others who may be seen as ritually impure. No, I do not believe this will be your career like mine. It is, however, our shared vocation - a calling to make evident in deed and word that the world is not as God intends and that we can work to fix that.

When I imagine this Gospel reading, there are two details in Mark's reporting that move me – touch and the importance of bodily restoration. Jesus immediately knows that someone has *touched* him in the throng of people in a way that is altogether different. His disciples are rightly incredulous and I smile thinking every time I read it that I would absolutely have been one of them. “What is wrong with you?” they say. Jesus knows. The woman's desire to reach out and touch the source of the power (if only the fringes of it) does, in fact, heal her. The detail that we are given is about the body; the flow dries up. When we think of the gathered crowd as a community (the Body of Christ), we see that Jesus has pulled the woman into the center of the story. In so far as she was excluded before, she is now the focus of God's action. Similarly, Jesus inverts the wailing and gnashing of teeth at Jairus' daughter's death. She is asleep, he says. The community's real grief is insulted by Jesus' appraisal. They scoff. He *touches* her, invites her to rise from her bed, and instructs the community to do the rest by giving her something to eat. Again, imagining the scene as the Body of Christ, we see that restoring Jairus' daughter to life must be accompanied by giving her a seat at the banquet table where there is always enough.

My beloved, you have shared that the Church does not attend to your despair, and you are right. But God does and the rightly focused minister does. This does not happen through hollow promises of hope or the suspended salvation of a Reign to come in the next life. It happens in the here and now through public acknowledgement and destigmatization from the pulpit. Through the long accompaniment of a community of support. You have been blessed with clinical

supports and a kinship network that loves you through depression, both embodied and spiritual. These people are the fulfillment of Christ's promise to wipe away *your* tears in the here and now.

My beloved, you have shared that the Church's history makes answers about the problems of evil and suffering seem hypocritical. These weak answers are further encumbered by the Church's flawed action and lack of focus on the marginalized. I assure you God has acted continually, despite these flaws of the Church. Communities of resistance have not only survived but thrived. You have learned about them and praised them. I see you; we see you attempting to build more inclusive networks, overlapping communities marked by their diversity and inspired by the trust and accompaniment for which you so deeply yearn. As the Body of Christ, we should listen more carefully and see the divine virtues of mercy and justice in your intention and action.

Even as I write these words to you, I am painfully aware that there is nothing that I could say or do to get you to believe it but believe it you must. Archbishop Tutu paraphrased a sermon of St. Augustine like this, "We without God cannot. God without us will not." And this is the radical part, the Mystery at the heart of these parables – scripture and *your* life – is mercy. God meets you in your depression and loneliness. God meets us all. We are not alone. God has not gone out beyond us awaiting some future arrival. God is present in the sacred language of our lives and our communities, in the very marrow of our bones and in our coursing blood and changing flesh. We have only to recognize God in the encounter to recognize God residing within.

Be patient with yourself, as the Holy One is patient with you. Healing may not come in the time you expect, but it will come.

My love, prayers and the grace of the One who made us are with you always.