CLOSENESS AND OTHERNESS, INTIMACY AND WOUND

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CALL TO WORSHIP

The New York Times reported recently on some new scientific studies showing that marital spats can affect your health. The studies identify a link between certain styles of arguing and a range of health risks, including depression, eating disorders, and heart disease. "When you're suppressing communication and feelings during conflict with your husband," one of the scientists declared, "it's doing something very negative to your physiology, and in the long term it will affect your health."

I was actually very relieved to see this article. Some of us had long supposed, of course, that conflict in intimate relationships had serious spiritual implications. But that was just unscientific speculation, and worse yet, in a domain in which nothing could be proven anyway. Now, though, the clergy of America's secular religion have performed their rabbinical function. With the new studies, it is now kosher to preach about marital spats because scientists have confirmed that they have real consequences.

This call to worship is actually just a warm-up for the friendly sparring match I'm hoping to have with Hans, Franz, and other scientists when we do our Adult Lifespan Faith Development program on science and religion.

With all due respect to science, we don't need a weather man to see how powerfully the ill winds can blow when conflict in intimate relationships gets intense. Understanding where the intensity comes from seems to be quite a challenge. Retracing the verbal volleying rarely illuminates the underlying causes. The scientists don't have much to offer us on that subject, and religion hasn't exactly covered itself with glory in this domain either. Sometimes the conflict feels unbearable – like we've broken our vows a thousand times. But so does the idea of giving up. We can't seem to fix things, but we can't just kiss and part either. Are we fated to repeat these patterns endlessly? Is there no help?

Come, let us devote ourselves once more to something worthy of our best energies. Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

Recently I found myself sitting in the entry area of a nice restaurant waiting for Jennifer to join me for dinner. She was attending the installation ceremony for the new priest at St.

Martin's. The event was running nearly an hour late. I'm sure the delay had nothing to do with longwindedness on the part of any attending clergy.

I was entertaining myself by watching the restaurant's large video display panel when an advertisement for Dentyne chewing gum came along. A shimmering piece of Dentyne gum was "flown in" from the left, as the videographers would say. An animated frog at the bottom of the screen projected his long tongue toward the gum and reeled it in. He was immediately transformed into a handsome animated prince, who was then joined by a beautiful animated princess. The cartoon prince and princess promptly morphed into an equally dreamy real-life couple, embracing on a balcony overlooking a magnificent cityscape. A sexy voice over capped off this theologically fascinating commercial with the words "icy fresh breath changes everything."

We laugh at advertising, and a lot of it certainly is ridiculous. But more often than not, commercials skillfully target some widespread longing or fear. My unscientific assessment is that at or near the top of the list of commercially targeted longings and fears are those that have to do with love.

I believe that the meaning of love has a fairly simple core: to see and accept others for the truth they are. Every human being longs both to see others and to be seen by others in this way -- a mutual love. And if love is seeing and being seen, then seeing and being seen fully – a seeing that extends even to the shadowy innermost parts of us -- is truly a love supreme. This is what it means to have an intimate relationship. It is one in which innermost things are revealed and accepted. The place where you get to show someone all the songs you never sang to anyone before, and be accepted.

We long for intimacy, but fear intervenes. Fear that we will fare poorly in life because we are not beautiful, or smart, or strong, or something. Such fears can drive us to seek the missing virtues in a Magical Other – a prince or princess. And naturally, anyone who enters this market for Magical Others must himself try to come across as much like a Magical Other as he can. This is likely to mean keeping in shadow the parts of himself that he judges to be unlovable; while looking for someone shopping in this same market who also finds him useful in filling in some missing virtues. This is the market in which promises are exchanged about "beds of roses, fragrant posies, caps of flowers, kirtles embroidered all with leaves of myrtle."

This occlusion of vision is ironic and even tragic. If being loved means being seen for the truth we really are, then that truth has to include the parts we consider weak or negative. If we keep parts of ourselves in shadow, we virtually guarantee that we will not find our way to true intimacy.

We can see in this dynamic some basic truths about intimacy. The first is that our relationships with others will never be any more loving than our relationships with ourselves. Growth in our seeing and acceptance of ourselves and growth in our seeing and acceptance of others must go hand in hand.

The second is that intimacy is not possible unless each person lets the other be truly other. This is the wisdom of Rilke's poetic conception of love as "two solitudes that border, greet, and protect each other." This may sound cold or isolated; but it captures well the paradox that human life has an immensely solitary quality, right alongside the possibility of a closeness that can go very deep. There is much intimacy to be had in bordering and greeting and protecting each other.

I believe the most important word in Rilke's aphorism is "border." Intimacy moves us toward love not by erasing the borders between two people, but rather, by sharpening them. If one person uses another to fill perceived gaps in his own virtues, the relationship will be one of constant trespass and disrespect. In contrast, if love means seeing another for the truth he is, that seeing can become clear only if the edge, the line between those two people, is also clear and distinct. Without such a border, either the wounding that always comes with intimate relationships will be greatly compounded; OR, in order to avoid that, the two people will establish a kind of buffer zone between them – nullifying the intimacy they sought to achieve by putting their lives together. So another paradox: without a well-maintained boundary between them, two people can't get close. Intimacy is grounded in separateness.

In the story Margaret shared with us today, she brings some history with her to a conversation about something that looks simple on the surface: choosing a long distance telephone company. Each of us carries some kind of historical suitcase everywhere he goes. Tom undoubtedly has one too, but his doesn't happen to pop open in this particular conversation. When it becomes clear to him that the conversation is about something more than long distance telephoning, Tom is able to let Margaret be other, to let her have her own history. In fact he wants to know about it, inviting her to allow herself to be seen and accepted for the truth she is – as other.

What is happening here? Something is shifting, putting the conversation about telephoning in a much larger context. Even though it seems like Margaret is being unfair to him, Tom manages to see that there are things at stake here more fundamental than mere fairness. The big thing at stake, of course, is love. To get to that, though, he has to put aside concerns about justice. He can't say "you're being unfair, illogical, and unreasonable."

And really now, does it EVER work to tell someone who we think is being unreasonable that he is being unreasonable? To hear that message, which is based on reasoning, the other person would need to be able to be . . . reasonable. But at that particular moment, the other person apparently isn't able to do that.

And this judgment of unreasonableness is entirely artificial anyway. What Margaret is doing can only be judged "unreasonable" by cropping the picture of this situation and looking just at the long distance telephone issue, taken out of its context in her life. Only by overlooking the need to discover its possible symbolic importance. This is why so many huge and wounding emotional fights seem to arise out of such small issues.

So Tom waives his justice claim and grasps the nettle, asking the all-important question: "What's really upsetting you?" This is risky -- something someone would do only if it were

really important to him to find out the answer. Because Margaret's reaction might be something like, "I'm upset about the long distance issue, and don't you condescend by trying to psychoanalyze me." But fortunately Margaret hears the real message Tom is sending. The subtext of his question is "I want to see you more deeply, more clearly." And the subtext of that subtext is the most important message any human ever delivers to any other human: "I love you," which means, "I want to get close enough to see the whole of you, the whole truth about you, with nothing left out, your whole story, including the wounds and scars."

When Tom asks his question, Margaret, or at least a significant part of Margaret, is far away in a dark wood, confronting old fears activated by this innocuous conversation about telephoning. Fears about marriage, surrender of independence, and raising three children as a single parent. And most of all, fears about trust. But she hears, and is brought back to the present. An ancient Chinese proverb says, "when the right word is spoken, it will be heard a thousand miles away." Indeed.

Because we are imperfect, we can't do this kind of thing with just anyone. Even if we find someone with whom we can get to this kind of seeing some of the time, we are not able to do it all the time. It's natural to think that the reason why is all those bumps and bruises, nicks and scratches, that come with intimacy; but actually, these represent our best chances of moving toward that love supreme, that seeing and being seen fully.

And yet another paradox: the best of those best chances are the very ones that cause the greatest pain. In their own right, the daily bumps and bruises of an intimate relationship are not very significant. Sometimes, though, they plug directly into unhealed wounds from much earlier in life – wounds now submerged in unconsciousness but still very sensitive. And the earlier the wounding, the greater its significance in our present-tense emotions. As tritely psychological as it may sound, the ones from childhood are the biggest, and they stay that way. Conscious memory fades, but the unconscious psyche has no sense of time . . . and a perfect memory. If the right button is pushed by a seemingly trivial but symbolic event in the present, we can be transported right back to the time and circumstance of that early wounding.

These highly significant wounds, and the smaller but symbolic present-tense ones that plug into them, are openings into a deep understanding of the person who suffered them – understanding by the person himself and by anyone close enough to be present and trusted when such wounds are activated. Such situations offer valuable chances for seeing and being seen fully, from both sides of an intimate relationship.

Over time, with enough choosing of love over justice, trust accumulates. The old fears about not being good enough recede. Self-revelation gets easier, at least in this one venue called intimacy. But trust has to be earned, and it is a slow expertise -- truly a spiritual practice.

I have to say, I think my first wife and I failed to appreciate all this. I think we struck one of those bargains that people arrive at in the market for Magical Others, in which each of us supplied qualities the other felt inadequate about. That enabled us to keep those inadequacies in shadow – basically the opposite of the kind of seeing each other fully that is at the core of what I called a love supreme.

I guess we thought this was a good division of labor and would minimize conflict. Couples do make divisions of labor -- like "you take out the garbage, and I'll feed the cat." But it's quite another story when those divisions involve major aspects of personality and character, like "you be competent out in the world --- for both of us, and I'll hold the moral compass -- for both of us."

Neither of us ever asked the key question recommended by the Jungian theologian James Hollis in his excellent study of intimate relationships: "What am I asking of this Other that I ought to be doing for myself?" Underneath the negative stories about ourselves that we internalized earlier in life, we both actually were eople with healthy capacities for competence AND moral navigation. Eventually, though, the parts of each of us that were kept in shadow resented the confinement, demanded expression in the world. Far from avoiding conflict, our division of labor assured that conflict would become more and more inflamed until it finally and dramatically erupted. And suddenly I was looking back on "a long conversation I thought she and I would finish differently." A costly piece of learning.

Much of this territory may seem more psychological than theological. So we should ask again that question we ask so often on Sunday morning: what does all of this have to do with spirituality and religion? Most psychologists would readily agree that intimate relationships will go better if we strive for greater self-knowledge; and better yet if we strive to bring up to consciousness old unhealed wounds to which our present-tense bumps and bruises are reconnecting us. Usually, though, their interest in these interior landscapes is triggered only when serious external symptoms show up – symptoms of something serious enough to be diagnosed and treated as deviant, defined in terms of what is typical or normal. Psychology has very little to say about whether there might be something life-altering about people devoting themselves to knowing others and being known by them in a deep way.

In contrast, in one way or another most varieties of religious experience are concerned with the transformative power of intimacy, the opening to the transcendent offered by healing, and the primacy of love as a spiritual value. Intimacy, healing, and love move us toward wholeness – an experience of being a part of, rather than apart from, our own deepest selves, our fellow humans, our world, and the universal spirit with which we long to be reunited, however named.

When I see another fully, I see both sameness and difference. The sameness confirms that I belong to the whole, as I look at the other and say, "I am that too." The difference confirms that I am only one part of that whole among many, causing me to say, "let me be me and let the other be other." Let this happen for the sake of wholeness, because the ground of any unity among the parts is their difference, their otherness.

We have been looking at intimate relationships this morning to heighten our capacity for mutual revelation of self. We shouldn't overlook, though, that this is also a place to begin the work of nurturing a broader kind of trust, so that it can be propagated in a world in which suspicion, hostility, and defensiveness are the order of the day. "A ridiculously difficult world where traffic doesn't stop for a woman crying in her car, clutching the steering wheel hard with both hands."

I guess freshening your breath could conceivably make some difference in your romantic fortunes. But if you really want to change everything, see wound as opportunity. Get close by being separate. Border and greet and protect each other. Choose love over justice. And before you "mount the leopard of your anger and ride all night," take a long look at your beloved – the one saying "I wish you could know what it means to be me." Take a long look and consider asking "what's really upsetting you?"

AMEN.