

“Love in Time of Coronavirus”

Romans 8: 18—25, 35—39

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How we think about life matters. What we think about suffering guides a large part of how we structure our life, our relationships, and our orientation to other people. For example, are these other people around us a series of threats? If so, better buy some more bullets. Or is everybody our best friend? In which case we all want to buy each other a coke, and sing kumbaya. How we think about life and other people matters.

In the midst of these questions, the core issue of how we think about suffering is crucial. Today, Let me offer up one theological view. I think it matters in this time of coronavirus.

The nature of life is tragic. Life inevitably involves some degree of suffering. Suffering is enduring pain, loss, distress, death. Suffering may be physical or mental. It includes things that we think, and things that we feel. All human beings experience suffering. The nature of life has a tragic dimension that comes from the fact that we are mortal. We are vulnerable. We are fragile beings. We are limited.

Paul Tillich referred to it as finite freedom. This fragility is required for us to experience the freedom to live, to feel, to grow. We know that we are limited. That there are not just beasts out there that would do us harm, but there are tiny microscopic organisms that are trying to inhabit the same space as we are, and in using us as hosts and end up doing us harm.

Even if the microbes and the beasts do not do us in, we are finite. One day, our bodies, or some crucial part, wears out. We are finite. This destiny is a necessity. In order to have growth in life, our skin must be flexible. But for our skin to be flexible, microorganisms will get in. For there to be life and growth, there must be death. If nothing ever died, there would be no room for new life. The nature of our existence is finite.

Being finite makes us anxious. In our anxiety, we have a temptation. The temptation is to seek to secure ourselves at all costs. The coronavirus comes, and we go buy out the store of all the food, medical supplies, and supplies for every bodily function. And then go lock ourselves in our underground shelter. Our temptation is to block ourselves out from anything that could possibly harm us. To protect ourselves at all costs. In this anxiety, we become ever increasingly hostile to other people. Seeking to secure ourselves, to make ourselves safe at all costs.

This is a dangerous place to be. In it we risk putting ourselves in the sway of the dynamics of evil. It is not that evil is a disembodied power that takes over us from outside. Rather, the dynamics of evil

are when we allow ourselves to begin to think of protecting ourselves, our tribe, at all costs. We end up justifying more and harsher ideas, which turn into more aggressive and violent actions. Then we are in a truly tempting situation, and we can fall under the power of the dynamics of evil. Where does it stop?

How we think matters. What we believe matters. Paul gives insights into how are we to think about the suffering of the present age. He does not describe suffering as an existential enemy. He says, this suffering is like a mother in child birth. The labor pains are necessary in order to give birth to a new reality.

Do you see what Paul does there? He reframes what suffering is, in ways that keep us from being afraid. He gives meaning to suffering: It is the only way that a new life, new creation, new reality will happen.

In essence he turns suffering from a situation where you lash out at someone, and turns it into a situation where you comfort, encourage, and support someone. As you would support a mother in labor. It is how you think of your own suffering: labor pains. The metaphor itself is healing. It gives hope. It also leads other people to know how to orient themselves, and how to act.

There is an acknowledgement of pain and suffering, while at the same time there is a feeling of being related both to other persons in their suffering, and of having a sense of relatedness to the created order. In other words, life in community has meaning. And life itself, the big picture of life, has meaning.

Our experience of God, is that God stands against death. God transcends death. And thereby helps us to transcend.

Sometimes, it is helpful to go way back to the thoughts of Augustine. He was this ancient Christian theologian from North Africa. He struggled with being a Christian. And with its practices. He was a convert to Christianity. As his thoughts matured, he came to see the importance of love.

“A people is the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love.
What brings people together is their love of the same thing.

Family is good, but it is limited to a few. A school, a team, a corporation is good, but it too is limited. A country is good, but again, even it is limited. The only thing worthy of our complete love is God. And God has directed us to love in two dimensions: Love of God, and love of neighbor. This invitation love broadens our horizons. We come to see that the arms of God are spread wide around the whole world. Thus we may be in the short term vulnerable and at risk, but ultimately we are secure in the arms of God. That security is found in experience of God's love.

When we know that love, and when we feel that love of God, we are set free to stop trying to secure ourselves at all costs. Yes, we try to take care of ourselves, but we do not do it at all costs – we do not

secure ourselves at the cost of our neighbor. We feel a sense of being loved. This love gives us the existential courage to reach out and love others. To risk ourselves for others.

Augustine put this in terms of being on a journey, and coming across someone who has fallen down. Augustine says, in essence, love allows you the courage to stop, and bend down to help them and lift them up. But if you bend down so far that you fall also, then you cannot be a help to them. In fact, you put yourself in the same situation, which is useless.

So love looks like this: bending over, humbling oneself, making oneself vulnerable, but not putting oneself at such risk that you deny yourself and become useless. Or even, where you become a burden for someone else.

That is a nice image in this time of the pandemic. There are things that we can do to help one another. We need to see those places where we can take a reasonable risk. But on the other hand, we need to make sure that we do our best to not fall down and become a burden to others. Or worse yet, to spread the virus and be part of others downfall.

This is a nice metaphor. If our feeling, our affections, move us to stop and bend over, our mind, our rationality, functions to keep from bending over too far.

If we think about life through rose colored glasses, we can make ourselves too vulnerable. On the other hand, if we surround ourselves with a suit of armor in a bullet proof bomb shelter buried 50 feet underground, we cut ourselves off from humanity.

Paul says: Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not powers, nor height, nor depth nor anything else in all creation. Including the coronavirus.

That is a way of thinking, a way of seeing, a way of feeling, a way of relating to people, a way of relating to the world that gives us an existential sense of hope and courage. It calls us to cultivate a sense of love based on the love of God. To cultivate habits: how have I practiced being loving today? Who has been my neighbor today?

Maybe there is one important item left on the shelf at the store. Do you really need it? If not, leave it there. Do you have a church directory? Or a list of friends, especially ones who are alone? Scroll through it: who can you give a call, just to check in with them in this time of isolation?

As the arms of God embrace the whole world, God invites us to let our love grow. Think about the public policies you have supported in the past. Have they taken into account how interconnected we are? Do we recognize that public health and the common good are concerns that will affect us more and more in an interconnected global world? If there is one thing the coronavirus has shown us, it is how globally connected we are.

So if that is how the world is, how we see the people in China or India or Iran or Mexico or Sudan – these are our neighbors. How do we love our neighbors in terms of public health policy? What

practices will we have there? We have a lot to learn. It will not be easy. But then, what was it Paul said: We are in labor. The labor pains are part of a new world being born.

Augustine indicated long ago: Love means you have to think the right way, to feel the right way, to act the right way. May God grant us the wisdom, the will and the discipline to live truly and faithfully in that divine love that embraces us all.

And always, remember: nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sources:

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