

## As God Loves

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May 10, 2015

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. . . .” -- John 15:9

Spoiler alert: last Wednesday evening, the Reading Group discussed *The Promise*, a work of historical fiction by Ann Weisgarber, and if you were planning to read it and don't want to know how things turn out, you may want to step out of the sanctuary now and return in three or four minutes.

The main characters in *The Promise* – Catherine, Nan, and Oscar – are fictional, but their interaction is played out against the backdrop of the hurricane of 1900, which is not. That storm, which destroyed the city of Galveston and much of Galveston Island, claimed over 6,000 lives, making it the single worst natural disaster in American history.

Both Catherine and Oscar are transplanted Midwesterners on Galveston Island. They grew up together in what was then the fashionable city of Dayton, Ohio, which they fled separately as adults for different reasons: Oscar to better his chances in the world, Catherine to escape the scandal of her relationship with a married man.

By the time they are re-united years later on Galveston Island, life has taken its toll on both of them. Oscar is a widower with a young son and a housekeeper named Nan, and Catherine is a cultured but impoverished musician whose career was destroyed by gossip. Oscar and Catherine need each other, they rediscover each other, and at the novel's end, after a new married life of less than three weeks together, both are dead in the hurricane and its aftermath.

None of us in the Reading Group wanted the novel to end on such a tragic note, but we appreciated the author's honesty. Life isn't fair. Hollywood, responding to our desires for eventual and inevitable happiness, would have given Catherine and Oscar's story a different ending, and if *The Promise* is made into a movie, I suspect some of us will be disappointed by its ending.

But good art, of the kind that Ann Weisgarber has produced, is more honest than Hollywood and more unflinching in its gaze than most of us are when we look at life. We don't want to see the tragic in life, and this reluctance to respond to life on its terms is one of the chief ways we trivialize Christianity. We want life to turn out better than it often does, and we believe that our foundational story has the power to shield us from life's terrors. It has, but only if we read it badly.

The story of Jesus Christ is a tragic tale with no happy ending. Neither the historical reality of Jesus's resurrection from the dead – whatever that historical reality was – nor the eschatological promise of a new heaven and a new earth from the book of Revelation – whatever that promise may hold – delivers us or anyone else from the reality of life's brokenness. To say, as Jesus says in this morning's text, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” is not cozy, it's perverse to anyone paying attention. The love of God is far from a simple matter, and we do ourselves and the world no favors when we pretend that the love of God makes things right. It doesn't. It has the power to make all things new, but it does not make all things right, at least not in history.

Jesus may very well love you, as we teach little Christian children to sing, but that's no guarantee that you will not suffer. In fact, if you're living it right, life may very well

cause you to suffer, just as it caused Jesus to suffer. And Jesus knew that God loved him. He said so in this morning's text and he said so in many other places. Scripture makes that assertion repeatedly, from its beginning to its end. Jesus was repeating what his Jewish tradition believed and handed on from generation to generation: God loved the Jewish people, God chose the Jewish people, and yet the history of the Jewish people, including Jesus, is inextricably entwined with suffering. What kind of love is that? As St. Teresa of Avila is supposed to have said to God, "If this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few."

And so it will always be. The number of God's true friends will always be very small, relative to the number of people in the world at any given time, because the vast majority of people want God to behave not as God behaves but rather as our friends and relatives behave.

We want God to love us as our parents loved us, assuming we had parents who did, in fact, love us, which many of us did not. We want Jesus to love us as our friends love us and as we love them, which means being there to listen, to offer advice, to support us when we need support. We want the life of faith to mirror the life of flesh and blood that we know so well, and so often the life of faith does not.

"Where is God?" is a question I often hear when folks are in the midst of pain, the implication being that God would stop this pain because God loves me. God will not allow me to suffer, or my loved ones to suffer, because people who truly love us do everything in their power to spare us from suffering. So where is our all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God for the refugees in Syria, the parents of schoolgirls in Nigeria, or the immigrants drowning trying to cross the Mediterranean from Africa to Europe? Where is God's love in the midst of all of that? Where was God's love for the ten nuns and 90 children of the St. Mary's Orphan Asylum that was swept away when the hurricane of 1900 struck Galveston?

Where was God's love? Where it's always been – in us and around us, and that makes the love of God tricky. God does and does not love us as our parents loved us or as we love our children or our friends. To speak of God's love is not to speak of a big person with a big emotion; it's to speak of a reality – a reality vastly more rich, vastly more complex, and vastly more profound than our limited minds and hearts can grasp. When we say that our mother loves us and when we say that God loves us, we're saying two very different things. God does not love us with the particularity of personality and emotional investment with which our mothers love us. Whether we're good girls or bad boys affects how our mothers interact with us, but not so with God, who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike, and that makes God's love a great deal more mysterious than Mom's.

If Mom loved us as God loves us, we'd call that enabling behavior, and we'd advise her to stop. We think it's a bad idea to reward bad behavior because we want to eliminate bad behavior or at the very least control it. And although only the most misguided of parents withhold love as a way to manipulate behavior, all of us who share the responsibility for raising children want them to grow up right. We reward good behavior and we censure bad behavior. We do it to children, and we do it to each other. It's too bad God doesn't seem to share our enlightened views.

I was talking a few days ago with a woman who doesn't go to church, and the reason she doesn't, I think, is because she finds us intellectually lacking. We oversimplify things. We give easy answers to tough questions. We stop thinking before we've reached the end of the problem. In this woman's case, the problem was her sister's child, born many years ago with such severe birth defects that it lived only a few hours.

"You're a religious professional," the woman said to me the other day with more

than a little annoyance. “Why did God let that happen?”

“I have no idea,” I replied.

The woman looked at me for a minute and then she said, “If you’d told me it was God’s will, I might have punched you in the nose.” I hadn’t realized our conversation had brought me so close to bodily harm.

To say that God loves us and the whole world in the face of suffering – not just human suffering, but the groaning of the entire creation that Paul speaks of – is a statement of faith, as all statements about God are. To speak of God’s love is also a defiant act of courage in a world where there is so much evidence to the contrary.

And that’s why Christianity is not for sissies. It’s not for babies. It’s not for the intellectually lazy or the morally timid or the faint of heart. We Christians don’t assert God’s love because we’re stupid; we assert it because we’re brave. We have the courage of the world’s most important conviction, which is that suffering does not have the last word. That’s what we mean when we speak of the love of God: we mean that suffering does not have the last word.

If Christianity, with the story of Jesus at its heart, were reduced to that one simple proposition – that suffering does not have the last word – could you live with that? I can.