

## 2 Corinthians 2:1-10

<sup>1</sup>So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit. <sup>2</sup>For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? <sup>3</sup>And I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice; for I am confident about all of you, that my joy would be the joy of all of you. <sup>4</sup>For I wrote to you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

<sup>5</sup> But if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent—not to exaggerate it—to all of you. <sup>6</sup>This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; <sup>7</sup>so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup>So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup>I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup>Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is probably really his fourth, because he alludes to two others that we don't have. In today's reading he refers to one of them, a letter he wrote rather than come visit because he and the Corinthians had had a painful argument the last time he was there, and he wanted to reconcile before making another visit. The letter he alludes to was written out of distress and anguish of heart, and with many tears, to let them know how much he loved them.

It also appears that one individual was the point person for the opposing side, and now that the conflict has been resolved, that person is at risk of being ostracized *or* voluntarily staying away from the rest of the church, "overwhelmed," as Paul says, "by excessive sorrow." Paul tells the Corinthians to be proactive in mending ties with that person. Whatever pain that person caused Paul was really caused to the entire congregation, and he has surely suffered enough so the congregation should console and forgive him.

This reading invites us to think about conflict. Last week the colleague with

whom I traveled was telling me that a couple in her church has not come for a month or so, and she thinks it's because of something she said about gun violence. She was gearing up to make a visit to them to see if she could clear the air. I once again rejoiced that when people disagree with me at Crossroads, they just tell me, instead of going through elaborate pantomimes of passive-aggression. I bragged shamelessly to her about the way people here work to stay connected, one of the first things I witnessed when I came in the aftermath of a painful conflict. It seems to me that the ability to do this is predicated on (in part) the ability to see oneself and any other person as more than adversaries. Or another way to say it would be to use Parker Palmer's formulation about holding tensions: we can *both* believe we are right and nobly motivated *and* understand that we may not fully understand the situation.

The journalist Robert Wright gave a lecture recently on challenges to the New Atheism (Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins), especially the mind-body problem. Robert Wright himself is not a person of faith, although he grew up Southern Baptist (I think), but he is curious, prodigiously smart, and spiritually inclined. One of the first points he made was that the New Atheists place a great deal of faith in science without realizing the extent to which science has been showing us how much we don't know. They overreach—encouraged, no doubt, by the idiocy of much popular Christianity that denies evolution or insists on biblical inerrancy. This overreaching manifests in the extravagant claim, for instance, that religion is the source of all violence in the world; were there no religion, there would be no violence, case in point the Palestine-Israel conflict.

Robert Wright pointed out in the lecture that correlation is not causation, and that Zionism was a secular movement, but there are more to the New Atheists' arguments. For instance, when confronted with the fact that Dr. King led a religiously-tinged nonviolent movement, one of them (Hitchens?) declared that Dr. King was not really a Christian. How could he tell? Because Christians believe in hell, and Dr. King never threatened his opponents with hell. Therefore he must not have believed in it, and therefore he was not a Christian. This argument is shockingly ignorant about internal diversity within Christianity; it also ignores some core Christian teachings about turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies, which surely informed Dr. King's religiosity.

So these are really shallow arguments, and you wonder why smart and sophisticated people would make them. Robert Wright and I think that it's confirmation bias: we take in and believe what supports our ideology, and we reject information that does not conform. There's also tribalism—I want to be loyal to my people, and I do not want to associate myself with certain other people, so I'll reject the assertions of those who are not like-minded. And there's just ego investment: I identify with my truth claims, and I feel diminished, hurt and threatened when they are questioned or undermined. Those are non-rational reasons that smart people make dumb arguments sometimes. If anyone besides me had to read Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in a first-year science class, you know that he says sometimes a new paradigm can't prevail until all the old scientists have died. It's that hard to get people to shift their thinking, even when logic and evidence support the shift.

So I am interested in the person in the Corinthian church who spearheaded the conflict with Paul. Whatever the argument was, whatever the merits of his position, he lost. I assume that his ego was injured, that he may have felt betrayed by his “tribe,” and that he may also have felt that information he brought was not given enough weight. The conflict had been painful to the congregation, and because he lost, he was the “presenting problem,” the cause of pain and the one most likely to be voted off the island. Paul’s instruction is that the congregation *must* forgive and console that man and reaffirm their love for him. Both the congregation and this man must die to ego so that they live again in love.

Richard Rohr, one of my favorite writers on spirituality, writes that

*All great spirituality is about letting go.* Instead we have made it to be about taking in, attaining, performing, winning, and succeeding. True spirituality mirrors the paradox of life itself. It trains us in both detachment and attachment: detachment from the passing so we can attach to the substantial. But if we do not acquire good training in detachment, we may attach to the wrong things, especially our own self-image and its desire for security.

His point is that we must die to our small-S selves in order to become who we truly are. What we invest in as part of an identity—such as being right, or being one of the right people—gets in the way of spiritual growth. I think he would see Paul as leading the Corinthians to surrender their egos—their rightness, their tribal pride—in order to be transformed. Rohr also says,

Every master’s lesson, every parable or spiritual riddle, every confounding question is intended to bring up the limitations of our own wisdom, our own power, our own tiny self. Compare that, if you will, to the Western educational approach of parroting answers, passing tests, and getting grades, which make us think *we do know* what is important and, therefore, we are important. . . . Eventually we must learn to hold the paradox of our finite self held within the eternal and infinite Love.

A gay writer from Portland, OR, David Khalaf, wrote recently about the bathroom bill in North Carolina that he was tempted to ignore all the fuss because he doesn't live in North Carolina. But he realizes that violence against one is violence against all. So he recommends what he calls "relational activism," which is essentially giving LGBT a face: "Instead of a faceless stranger, it's your niece, Jenny, who can't get a wedding cake. It's your friend, Keisha, who must wear "gender-appropriate" clothing at work. It's your son, Jiang, who is fired for being gay. People are so much harder to hate when we love others just like them." He acknowledges that this is frightening and dangerous, but he says, "Only by solidarity with other people's suffering can comfortable people be converted." He is thinking like Paul—the suffering of one is the suffering of all, and by bringing a tension to the surface and holding it lovingly, you invite spiritual growth, the dissolution of ego attachments and the limitations of one individual's wisdom.

Since I spent the week of the 17th at the Festival of Faiths in Louisville, suffused with the spirit of Thomas Merton, I will close with something from Merton's Asian Journal.

I stand among you as one who offers a small message of hope that, first, there are always people who dare to seek on the margins of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, nor dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a stake of risk. And among these people, if they are faithful to their own calling, to their own vocation and to their own message from God, communication on the deepest level is possible.

The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers and sisters, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. So what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.

Let us pray. God beyond all knowing, in us and around us, give us the grace to see

how small we are and how great is your realm in which we are included. Lead us deeper, to direct knowledge of our original unity with one another and with you.  
Amen.