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MaryKate Morse

George Fox University, mkmorse@georgefox.edu

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Flourishing, not Fear: The Gift of Love (Part III)

MaryKate Morse

As suggested in the first two essays, we struggle to flourish in our academies and professions because fear inhibits us. We neglect God’s gifts while we attempt to control and manage our own lives. We believe that without diligent attention to our own efforts, we will be lost. Our well-being, value, and security will vanish. Though I doubt that many of us would confess to this type of thinking, we still often live as if we do. In our strivings and insecurities we get lost. We lose the fullness of our humanity and our ability to flourish. In the second essay I offered a spiritual discipline to deal with fear using II Timothy 1:7: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” I wrote about the gift of power, and in this essay I write about the gift of love. God never intended for us to live anxious lives, instead he gave us all of the capacities we need to flourish. Our minds and our abilities are sufficient for all that God imagines for our lives. God also gives us love.

God gives us agape love, which is different from the natural love we have for our families, relatives, friends, people like ourselves. Agape love is the love of friend and foe. God is not offering a life of contented bliss with other like-minded souls. God gives instead a greater gift, the ability to love all persons, even our enemies, the gift that makes us fully human and more like our Creator. No other spiritual leader before Jesus had said, “Love your enemies.” The statement is irrational. It makes no sense, but it is the most human thing we can do.

When you love those who persecute you and hope good for those who are different than you or more successful than you, then you love like Jesus. This is the hardest of all. It is not too hard to accept the gift of power. But this gift, the gift of a love that loves those who are our enemies or are different from us, is very difficult. Saying “Jesus loves me” is not so hard. But saying to an enemy, “I love you” is very, very hard. So, what is this kind of love and how does it overcome fear?

Diogenes Allen, a professor at Princeton, wrote in his book Love: Christian Romance, Marriage, Friendship that perfect love is the conviction that every person has absolute value. Absolute value in regard to other people means that the world is not sufficient with just me. It is not all about my ideas, goals, and successes. It is also about yours. When I’m consumed with me, I’m excluding the possibility of another’s value. We are only truly human when we accept the right of other humans to exist, think, play, and contribute.

When we’d rather shut someone out, we are responding out of fear, not love. When we fear, we judge. I’m not referring to righteous judgment which is a response to evil. I mean judgment which is a reaction to fear. When we judge out of fear, we destroy in our own minds something about the other’s humanity. We close the switch of love and open a path to fear. And then we are
capable of many dark things. I often struggle with choosing to love, especially when someone repeatedly tries to discredit or minimize my ideas or contributions. It happens to all of us. So how do we do love?

In his book *The Traces of God in a Frequently Hostile World*, Diogenes Allen tells the story of Iulia de Beausobre. In the early 1930s Iulia was arrested and tortured in Russia during the reign of Stalin when millions were tortured and died. She lived in solitary confinement for three months, and spent three more months in the “Inner,” the worst part of the prison. Most prisoners could only endure this type of interrogation and torture for about six weeks. She lasted six months. She was brutally tortured by “scientists” trying to discover how to make people become pure instruments of the state by erasing their personal will.

During her suffering Iulia discovered that there were three possible responses to her tormentors: one, she could fight them and make it a battle of wills. She saw prisoners who fought, and they often did not survive. Two, she could become utterly passive and withdrawn from her tormentors. Prisoners who did this retreated into an inner world for self-preservation, but they too rarely survived. She considered these two responses but felt both made her less human.

So she chose a third response. She chose to notice everything going on around her. She chose to look her tormentors in the eyes, willing them to connect with her and become human. And when she did, she experienced Christ’s presence with her in a special way. By being fully present, a creative possibility opened up. When the tormentors saw “her,” they connected with her as human beings. Ultimately her oppressors were unable to continue their torture, and they came to respect her and care for her. Because she accepted their capacity to have value, they had to accept her value.

We probably will never face that level of dehumanization, but we can in little ways dehumanize others and thus ourselves. When we are threatened or fearful, we too can choose to be combative or withdrawn. But God gives us the third way, the gift of agape love. That love means to accept the risk of suffering and pain for the hope that extending humanity and value to another changes the relationship. We are fully human and flourish when we accept God’s gift of love. It is freely given. Not withheld. We accept this truth. We take the verse *II Timothy 1: 7* as a spiritual discipline and in the same way ingest the promise. Like food, we must eat again and again, continually absorbing its truths into our being in order to live with love, not fear.

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