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Falling in Love

Healing and Reconciliation Enfolded in God's Embrace

We have seen the problems that some of the standard accounts of salvation—in the language of redemption, atonement, sacrifice—have yielded, particularly for the contemporary believer repelled by the proliferation of violence and abuse, especially as propagated in and through religious practices and institutions.

Nevertheless, persons continue to live faithful lives and many find radically renewed lives in Christ. Let us look in this chapter at how lives are changed through encounters with God, and specifically through a relationship with Jesus Christ, encompassed by the Holy Spirit. Here we will give a generic, commonsense account of the human person, his or her need for God, and a lifetime journey of death and resurrection as part of a community of faith. The details of how this unfolds in any particular life in its concrete context need to be added. A few examples are given at

the end of the chapter, but each reader can add his or her own specifics. How all this fits within the Christian tradition that we have inherited and how we might explain it in a more analytic way today will come in later chapters.

A Life of Death and Resurrection

The first thing to note about our current context is that we now understand "salvation" or "atonement"—the making-us-right-with-God—as a *process* not a *state of being.* This is part of a bigger historical shift in modern consciousness—which we will explain later—but for now we will begin discussing the human person in terms of the life cycle.

Being Human

As infants we are mostly taken up with animal instincts and needs. This includes not only the need for food, water, and someone to change our diapers, but the need for touch—cuddling, holding, caressing—and other kinds of stimulation. Hence, we now recognize the importance of early attachment to caregivers, and the power of modeling and imitation at critical stages of childhood. Yet right from the start, human infants have another quality: the ability to *wonder.* Our bonding with caregivers includes sounds and sights that stimulate attention and, eventually, inquiry. From the beginning, the tools for language are being put in place so that when we become toddlers the incessant "Why?" questions begin. Play and experimentation figure into this exploration of what is not us. This means that we all have the capacity to move beyond ourselves; to bond with others in meaningful ways, to trust our caregivers implicitly, to try on different roles in social interaction, to long to understand and conquer our worlds, however small or insignificant.

Thus it is the nature of being human both to go beyond our current realities and to be entrapped within them. We are fascinated—ever fascinated—with the other, with the world around us. An aspect of this interest is of course *self*-interest, yet its reach beyond ourselves is unlimited. There is always more to experience, more to try and to understand, more to affect with our actions. Still, we are stuck in a body, a time, and

a place. We do need to eat and poop and get some sleep. So we are—forever—a contradiction; captivated by unrestricted wonder yet limited in our reach, both literally and figuratively.

We also are all born into an already constituted community. Biologically we are conceived through some relationship, whether it involves romance, licentious sex, or a petri dish. No one comes alone into the world. Whether wealthy or poor, from an upper middle-class American suburb or a refugee camp in Lebanon, none of us is a blank slate. We are born into a world of *meaning* and *value*. We inherit these meanings and these values and they affect us from the very moment we are brought into life, if not before.

So our needs and our wonder are shaped initially by others. These others find themselves in worlds defined by still others, not only other individuals but other social structures, social institutions, economic frameworks. A child born in a refugee camp in Turkey in 2014 is conditioned, from the beginning, in a very different way than a child born in 1966 in a commune in San Francisco.

These preestablished meanings and values then come to shape our wonder and our needs. Our needs are met—or not—laden with narratives about who we are, to whom we belong, which needs are legitimate and when and how they should be met. Our wonder is met with answers; we are told what is true, we are given explanations to make sense of these truths, we receive hints about what counts and what doesn't. In the process our very experiencing is shaped: our seeing, our hearing, our paying attention, our feelings of excitement or shame.

What becomes most significant is the way our needs and our wonder themselves are interpreted. If meeting my needs is understood to be optimal (in other words, I am spoiled), I will inherit a particular set of expectations. If, on the other hand, I am punished for being hungry, or having a dirty diaper, my expectations of life and of myself will be diminished. Likewise, if my inexhaustible wonder is encouraged, even if my world is resource-poor, I will have a sense of my own capabilities that will support my native tendency to marvel.

Accordingly, not only am I as an individual a combination of constructive creativity and very real limitations, so also is my community. The strengths of a tradition lie in its role in protecting infants and guiding child development. A community's meanings and values take natural

inquisitiveness and orient it, providing the curious child with tools to negotiate her questions about and interactions with the world around her. The liability of communal life and the power of social persuasion is that dramatically negative influences can affect very malleable hearts and minds toward distorted feelings and ideas. As mentioned above, these are most destructive when they involve messages about our creativity and embodiment themselves.

So we come to what the Judeo-Christian tradition has designated as *sin*. This is the recognition that the human spirit, while itself oriented beyond itself, can become mired in self-indulgence in a way that curtails this orientation to the good. Ironically, there is a way in which the distortion of this native goodness lies in its unrestricted nature. Because our imaginations and our questions reach to the sky, so to speak, we can think that we ourselves have no limits. We mistake our urge for comprehensive knowledge with the reality of such knowledge. We erroneously think we are gods. Or we simply assume that our ideas and needs and pleasures and urges take precedence over everyone else's, that we deserve special attention as if we were gods.

The author of the book of Genesis gets at this aspect of human nature in the third chapter—the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. This is the stuff of "mythos," of story told as events that serve as commentary on the nature of the cosmos. In this case, it is the heart of human nature and its stubborn propensity to overreach itself that is at stake. While a surface reading interprets the essence of Adam and Eve's sin as disobedience, there is something deeper at work here. It is the temptation to be like God—knowing good and evil—that so captures our iconic forbearers. The story is not about some literally existent parents of the human race but is about each and every one of us. We are all tempted to overreach ourselves and do what we can to become like gods.

But the dilemma does not remain merely at the individual level. The disorientation that comes with the basic sin of self-aggrandizement has its social consequences, as the further chapters in Genesis illustrate. Power and shame are perpetuated; jealousy and rancor are passed on from one generation to another. So while sin is, at root, a failure to accept our limitations while yielding to the wonder that moves us beyond ourselves, the effects of these failures become entrenched in cultural mores and social systems.

Social sin is the systemic evil that keeps certain persons disenfranchised while elevating others to privileged status. It involves practices that disregard the earth's natural systems and the impact of human affairs on those systems. It affects not just structures like an economy, but penetrates to the very consciousness of whole social classes.[1] The very way one is aware of one's world, the way one pays attention, the expectations one has of life, can become disordered. Thus, not only is it true that we come into the world already influenced by the meanings and values of a community, those meanings and values are skewed by generations of individual and group biases. Social prejudices and the assumption that "man" can manipulate "nature" at will permeate our cultures.

This distortion is what we traditionally have called original sin, and its fruit is a social "surd" in which reasonable and good persons who choose reasonable and good courses of action are less and less numerous. This results in a moral impotence in which the course of human affairs—writ large or small—gets stuck in cycles of decline. As Bernard Lonergan puts it:

> There is no use appealing to the sense of responsibility of irresponsible people, to the reasonableness of people that are unreasonable, to the intelligence of people who have chosen to be obtuse, to the attention of people that attend only to their own grievances. Again, the objective situation brought about by sustained unauthenticity is not an intelligible situation. It is the product of inattention, obtuseness, unreasonableness, irresponsibility. It is an objective surd, the realization of the irrational.[2]

We are each, thus, a combination of a great eros of the human spirit reaching beyond ourselves to truth, beauty, and value, and the very mitigated reach of our embodied spirits. This limitation is due both to our finitude as creatures and to the sinful social structures in which we grow and develop. It is also due to the choices we make. Sin is both what I receive and what I create. I am subject to the social sin that comes before

1 On social sin and its several dimensions, see Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), esp. pp. 197–213.

2 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "Dialectic of Authority," in *A Third Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 9.

me and influences me. But I am also responsible for the choices I make within the concrete reality in which I live. Either way, both I and my culture are stuck in the moral impotence whereby the actions we take to solve the problems created by sin only perpetuate them. As St. Paul puts it:

> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but the sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:15,19–24)

Moral impotence in the inner person involves this struggle and failure to do what we most desire. Moral impotence reveals itself at the sociocultural level as the surd whereby reason fails to make its case since people are unreasonable, and the good cannot be discerned because the discerners are themselves prejudiced. How can we turn a situation around if even our understandings of the situation are distorted by our dysfunctional psyches? How does new vision and new life emerge if even our deepest desires are disordered in determining the good?

Turning Moral Impotence Around

Concretely, what happens in some people's lives is that we fall in love and this falling in love changes everything. It could be the love of parent and child, of romantic partners committed to the long haul, of lifelong friends. The love given and received, not as fleeting emotions but as an undertow carrying everything forward, transforms our lives from self-service to self-sacrifice. "Besides particular acts of loving, there is the prior state of being in love, and that prior state is, as it were, the fount of all one's actions. So mutual love is the intertwining of two lives. It

transforms an "I" and "thou" into a "we" so intimate, so secure, so permanent, that each attends, imagines, thinks, plans, feels, speaks, acts in concern for both."[3] This undertow of love propels us to seek truth when deceit is rife, to promote values that will enhance the flourishing of our loved ones, to speak out for justice when power has triumphed over the good.

Furthermore, for some of us this experience of love goes beyond the human to the "transcendent," the "wholly other." In other words, we fall in love with something beyond our creaturely existence. Bernard Lonergan calls it an "otherworldly falling in love"; Paul Tillich calls it "being grasped by ultimate concern"; and Rudolph Otto speaks of the *mysterium fascinans et tremendum* (fearful and fascinating mystery).[4] This religious experience, like all of human life and meaning, begins very simply in childhood and grows and changes over a lifetime. It involves the deep level of our lives that defies explanation or expression. It catapults our concern for others beyond our inner circle of kin and compatriots to a wider vision that includes all human persons and creation itself in its many manifestations.

For those in the Christian tradition, this Other with whom we fall in love is not just a creative force field but a person. We inherit from the Jewish tradition not only a robust view of God as an all-powerful creator but also a notion of God as engaged in history and in relationship with human persons. This is both a majestically awesome God and a lovingly present one, a God who establishes a covenant with Israel and faithfully follows her through apostasy and infidelity. This God provides his people with the Torah—the Law—as a means of preserving and nurturing the covenant relationship.

Christians believe that this awesome and faithful God entered history in a particular way in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In addition to the "inner word" involved in the otherworldly falling-in-love mentioned above, there is the "outer word" of a person in history who supremely revealed God to humankind. In fact, as Christians we believe that this historical person was God himself. Furthermore, after his death and resurrection, the risen Christ returned to the Father

3 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 33.

4 Ibid., 106. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1957) and Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

and a new era emerged; the Holy Spirit that had raised Jesus from death was sent anew into the world to be ever-present with the community of disciples that came to be called "Christians."

The point here is not to begin delineating Christian dogma, but to note that the fascination with the *mysterium tremendum* that constitutes religious experience is, for Christians, an experience of *relationship.* Indeed, it is a threefold relationship, with a nurturing Father/Mother, a risen Lord who lived concretely in history, and the Spirit that permeates all of creation and promotes the reversal of sin and decline in our lives today. We enter into the love that exists within God in Godself, and experience this love over and over again as our lives unfold.

How does this concretely operate in Christians' lives? While the specific ways in which we are met by this incomprehensible love-made-incarnate are as manifold as there are persons and circumstances, we can say a few things in general about how this loving relationship goes forward.[5]

We may be socialized into the Christian tradition in a way that captivates our deepest desires and stimulates our imaginations. So we are provided with a treasure trove of stories, images, and personal narratives that ever propel us forward in living out our deep longing for the "more" beyond our small world of minor concerns. Alternately, we may have been raised into a religious tradition that so stifled our deepest yearnings, and/or promoted such a terrifying or restrictive view of God that our psyches were severely damaged. Or we may have had no religious training as children yet been encouraged in our curiosity to always seek truth, beauty, and goodness.

Whatever our socialization, at some point we are touched by the "numinous," a sense of something beyond us that captures our hearts and minds and pushes us to learn more. Dorothy Day was an atheist and anarchist. When she became pregnant, she was so enthralled by the miracle of life growing within her that she concluded there must be a

5 This account, admittedly, presumes a lifestyle in which basic needs are more or less taken care of. In other words, it describes the general frame of reference of persons who have enough to eat each day, who have access to good educational systems, who look forward to growing into lives of contribution to society. It does not seek to describe the lives of those in deep poverty or who live in dangerous political and social circumstances. Clearly, God's love is experienced in such situations and there are extraordinary examples of how God has worked in them. This description serves only as a model that of course needs to be applied and amended to fit diverse contexts and stories.

God and she decided to learn more about this Creator. C. S. Lewis was engaged for years in intellectual questions about atheism and the existence of God; then one day he got on a bus at the bottom of a hill and when he got off at the top he simply knew that God existed. In both these cases there was a long journey of learning more about this God they had encountered, specifically as known in Jesus Christ, but the initial encounter came as a gift unforeseen.

This experience of gift—the fact that encounters between God and our deeper selves comes not as a matter of achievement but as an unheralded offering—is at the core of many believers' lives. We can undertake disciplines of prayer, worship, or Bible study, but the relationship we have with God is not something that we can manipulate or control. In fact, the idea that our faith is a matter of God's action upon us rather than the other way around is what Christians call "grace" and it has been at the heart of Christian lives from the earliest disciples on down through history. God comes to us, in all our concreteness and brokenness, and we respond.

What about this brokenness, the sinful selves and structures in which we are stuck without obvious resolution? How does this gift of encounter and otherworldly falling-in-love change any of the moral impotence and destruction in our lives or in the world? Does a single encounter with the numinous magically change people from sinners to saints?

While love as expressed and experienced in ongoing encounters with God has a transformative effect, this occurs within long journeys of pain, struggle, and renewal. We, and our worlds of meaning and value, are broken and there is no easy fix. So we as individuals and as communities of faith enter into the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, not as an event long ago but as made new daily in our concrete lives. We put ourselves into the stories of Jesus's life and teaching and thereby immerse ourselves in his countercultural message. As much as we are able, we put into practice his teachings about the kingdom of God. This involves us in our own countercultural actions, combating our personal addictions and prejudices while serving those marginalized from social benefits. We seek out those who are victims of injustice and seek to reorient structures that mitigate against full human flourishing.

But the Jesus story is about so much more than moral injunctions or ethical imitation. The story is about a Messiah who is risen from the

dead, who is present still today in our midst through the Holy Spirit. So we immerse ourselves in his story in order to grow in divine relationship within a present reality. Part of that story and our reality is the power of evil to infiltrate human minds and hearts and social systems. And the apex of the Jesus story is the utter failure of Jesus's human mission and the complete victory of ill-meaning power-hungry authorities. In this we identify with Jesus to the extent that we have been broken by those wielding power over us as well as in the ways in which we have participated in a life of power-brokering ourselves. Jesus lived his life to the full, in communion with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. His love was manifest in his willingness to die rather than perpetuate evil systems by striking back at his detractors. In entering this story over and over again we discover and rediscover ourselves as both victims and sinners. At the same time we encounter Christ's great love in choosing to suffer evil rather than perpetuate it.

The heart of the story is, of course, not the crucifixion by itself but the empty tomb discovered three days later. This is the heart of the story for Christians today as well. Our "other-worldly falling-in-love" comes to ground concretely where our lives of brokenness and deceit are revealed and thus reversed. This is the work of God in our lives—the graced moments of both grief and great joy when we face our wounds and our sins in light of God's perpetual healing and forgiving love. Many many things may facilitate these recurrent renewals: the love of others in a worshiping community of faith, worship itself in all its manifestations, from song to smell to sacrament. Study and intellectual pursuit aid some, immersion in the natural world speaks to others. Long periods of silent prayer or verbal praying in tongues—God's grace comes to us in varied and multiple manners.

Multiple Conversions

Through the life cycle, our recurrent religious conversions shift and change in their focus. When we move from being young children to adolescents, we naturally move from literal pleasure and pain concerns to more intangible needs for social approval and security. As we negotiate our identities as teenagers—over against both our parental guardians and our peers—God often comes as an intimate companion affirming us in

our uniqueness. The love of God—both for God and from God—captures our energy and exuberance and gives us a place in our social worlds. The wonderful feeling of being loved by an Other right down to our core carries the day. Jesus becomes a cherished friend and confidante, the Holy Spirit a vehicle by which we experience the Father's nurturing love. This powerful affective bond can propel the young faithful to energetic and courageous works of mercy: mission trips, work in underprivileged communities, new ventures to bring hope to forgotten parts of society. Any church community is enhanced by such passion.

As we get older and life gets more complicated, the initial exuberance can wane. Alternately, we can cling to the good feelings of our first godly infatuation, presuming that feeling good about God is the same as being in God's presence. As in any love relationship, if it is to last, the focus must shift from the more fleeting moments of exhilaration to the deeper undertow of committed love. We also come to discover some of the more negative sides of ourselves and our situations. We grow to be disillusioned with our anticipations of life. The systemic inequities of our society become apparent. Marriages turn out to be based on social mores or false promises that don't pan out. A career may falter. Family expectations may land us in jobs we don't want. We start to realize that roles set out for us due to social class or gender or assumptions about sexual orientation are faulty.

So our participation in the Jesus narrative also begins to shift. Rather than resurrection serving as a panacea that makes everything in my life and my world perfect, just like I want it to be, it turns out there are multiple deaths and resurrections to be lived through. We come face-to-face with some of the inherited distortions from our personal or social traditions. Most painfully, we can discover that our religious traditions themselves have dysfunctional elements. Sometimes, in order to follow the deepest desires of our hearts, to pursue the wonder that reaches to the truly transcendent, we need to reject or leave our religious homes. We are called to discover a path that is truly God's call for us, not that prescribed by others, however well intentioned.

This further move has been spoken of as a conversion "from religion to God." The outer trappings of religious practice become refined as we begin to distinguish the institutions that have nurtured us from the ground of God's love. We move from the joys of the "baptism of

water" to the more difficult "baptism by blood." While this latter term has its origins in the martyrs of the early Christian centuries, we all enter into a martyrdom of sorts as our false selves erode and new psychic and social infrastructures emerge. Spiritual guides have also referred to this as a stage of "purgation," in which our sinful habits and dysfunctional defenses are purged, just like a special diet might purge our bodies of toxins.[6] Because it can involve moving beyond conventional religion, we can experience this as a kind of loss of faith, or a time of spiritual darkness.[7]

If we persevere in this darkness, we discover that our relationship with God has moved into a new mode. Rather than thinking in terms of faithfulness that will be rewarded, or a life that will issue into complete freedom and happiness, we discover that there is a kind of darkness that is part of life itself. That is to say, we encounter our limitations again. Not only are we limited by our bodies and our locus in a time and a place but the reach of our wonder and knowledge are finite. The beginning of wisdom is to know that we don't know. Rather than expecting that one day the darkness will end and be replaced by multiple lightbulbs of insight, we grow more comfortable in the "not-knowing-ness." This is often accompanied, as we grow older, with the restrictions imposed by changing bodies and intermittent or even life-threatening health concerns.

The centerpiece of this growth in faith is the ever-constant cycle of death and resurrection. While a confrontation with physical death may be part of our story, there is the ongoing challenge of our deep desires and their limitless reach toward truth, beauty, and love combined with

6 On traditions with regard to stages on the spiritual journey, see Jean Marc LaPorte, "Understanding the Spiritual Journey: From the Classical Tradition to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius," at http://www.jesuits.ca/orientations/stages%20in%20the%20spiritual%20journey.pdf. Accessed May 23, 2015.

7 For a psychological perspective on the development of faith, see James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), and Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984). On the dark night of the soul, see Constance Fitzgerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, 2nd ed., ed. Joanne Wolski Conn (New York, Paulist Press, 1996), 410–35.); Barbara Dent, *My Only Friend Is Darkness: Living the Night of Faith with St. John of the Cross* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1992), and Gerald May, MD, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper San Fransciso, 2005).

our very partial successes in satisfying such desires. God comes to us, over and over again, with an experienced fulfillment of these desires even and especially when we ourselves can't reach up to them. Our sins, our wounds, our social realities, and our mere creatureliness curtail our flourishing. Yet God provides such flourishing in ever surprising ways and through various and serendipitous means. Gradually we move from contract thinking—God will give us what we want if we do things right—to covenant love—an adventure of trust in relationship to the divine.

What does "redemption" or "salvation" or "atonement" mean in this picture of faith? As indicated earlier, it is not a matter of attaining something or reaching a "state" of grace in God's eyes. Rather it is this ongoing adventure in relationship in which we perpetually enter and reenter the Jesus story of death and resurrection as part of our own dying to self. Jesus of Nazareth is also the risen Lord of the Church. In the cycles of the church year we put ourselves into his birth, life, death, and resurrection and discover our sins and our need for healing over and over again. We die and are reborn many times over and so live a journey of atonement. The Holy Spirit meets us in this as an always-present companion who gradually touches our hearts and changes our desires. Gently, over time, with plenty of messiness and struggle, sometimes requiring great courage, our deepest desires for the truly "beyond" replace our minor but persistent idolatries.[8]

This growth in love and identification with the crucified and risen Lord is often accompanied by a growing identification with others in their struggles. Whether it is members of our own family, neighbors down the street, or women and children kept against their will in human trafficking circles (who may, surprisingly, actually *be* down the street), we—forgiven and healed ourselves—become agents of change for others. So not only do we receive God's forgiveness and love, we incarnate saving help ourselves. God uses us in our frailty to be a means of grace for others. These others, in turn, are much more than the recipients of charity; they serve as agents of divine love for us as well.

However mature or spiritually wise we are, this process of living

8 For more on this approach to salvation, see Sebastian Moore, *Jesus: Liberator of Desire* (New York: Crossroad, 1989). See also Sebastian Moore, *The Contagion of Jesus: Doing Theology As If It Mattered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

in the dark dependent on God's grace, the cycles of dying, rising, and dying again, are unending. They will go on right up until our physical death. We do hope for a complete fulfillment of our longing for God beyond death. This hope of future realization is writ throughout the New Testament and was heralded in the medieval tradition as the "beatific vision," when we will see God face-to-face. But we can barely imagine what this existence will be like, except that it will be a continuation and intensification of the divine love we experience in the here and now. In any case, our lives of covenant love in the here and now—our salvation—will never cease to revolve through death and new life.

Sample of Lives Lived in Faith

Having presented a description of Christian faith as a process of salvation in general terms, let us provide a few case studies to illustrate how this appears when some "flesh" is added. These are composite and fictional personages and provide mere glimpses into lives of faith, but they offer some illustrations that can fill out the broad account given above.

Clarissa

Clarissa is the daughter of Italian immigrants to the United States. Her father, Francesco, came to the United States when he was eighteen years old and found work in the mines of Western Pennsylvania. He met a young woman from northern Italy who had emigrated with her parents when she was eleven, settling in the same town where Francesco worked. They married and had four children, of which Clarissa was the oldest. Clarissa grew up as a student in the local and very traditional Roman Catholic school in her district, attending church regularly. Her mother worked from home as a seamstress and attended mass every day. Clarissa's first communion, just prior to the changes that came with Vatican II, was a major feast in the community, complete with white gloves, white dresses, and much fanfare.

When Clarissa was eleven, she was chosen to help decorate the church for special occasions, along with several other girls from her school. She felt quite privileged to do this and loved making their little

parish church as beautiful as possible. On a few occasions, the priest asked her to stay after the others had gone home. She again felt quite privileged and was especially pleased to have a special relationship with Father Roger, whom she admired. Mostly they had chats about her life in school and her family. At one point Father Roger asked her to sit on his lap so they could be more comfortable while they talked. At first she thought this was odd, but then it became routine. Eventually, Father Roger began holding her in ways she did not like, and touching private parts of her body. He assured her that this was normal. Though it made her feel quite uncomfortable and she asked him to stop, she had no way to avoid these encounters. The one or two times she tried to talk about this with her mother, she was silenced and accused of being disrespectful.

At the age of eighteen Clarissa was fortunate enough to receive a scholarship to John Carroll University in Cleveland, where she received a degree in education. She participated in the campus ministry at the school and enjoyed the very progressive liturgies that were held. She grew in her faith and helped to begin a praise and worship service that took place each Sunday evening. She was able to use her musical talents to assist in these services by playing the piano. She met and married Paul, a fellow student and a devout Catholic.

Clarissa and Paul both were able to get jobs in a big city not far from Clarissa's parents. Clarissa taught high school science while Paul worked in a church-based mission that served the homeless. Though they attended their local parish, they were not comfortable with the priest, who was resistant to the changes that had come with Vatican II. Problems developed in the marriage due to Paul's increasing drinking habits and Clarissa's discomfort with their sexual lives. When Clarissa approached her priest for help, he dismissed her concerns as "infantile" and told her that her job was to please her husband. Paul pressed her to have children and chided her on her "issues" when it came to sexual intimacy.

Eventually, the couple split up and after several years divorced. Clarissa's mother was ashamed and Clarissa left the church altogether. She did not attend church for over a decade. By her mid-thirties she had advanced to being a vice principal in a publically funded middle school. She was offered a job as principal in a very prestigious Catholic girls school. While she very much wanted the job, she realized that if she

took it, she would have to come to terms with her past. In the end she took the job but also entered into therapy and found a companion in her journey in a close female friend who was a Presbyterian minister. It was only through therapy and this friend's encouragement that Clarissa came to recognize that she had been sexually abused. The next year she committed herself to a Lenten journey that involved exploring her religious heritage and writing a spiritual autobiography. She attended the Easter vigil that year, the first in over ten years, and was brought to tears with both grief and joy as the darkness turned to light and "Jesus has risen" was heralded by choir and organ together.

Clarissa has become an active member of her local Roman Catholic church. She has remarried and, while unable to have biological children, she and her husband adopted a young boy from China, and four years later a baby from Peru. She has become enthralled with concerns over the environment and left the educational field to start a foundation that promotes urban gardening. She continues to make annual retreats and has an active prayer life. She has a deep love for Jesus and a growing sense of the Creator blessing her each day.

Gerald

Gerald is an Augustinian monk in his eighties who lives in a monastery just outside Toronto. He was raised as a Catholic in Nova Scotia, where his German ancestors had settled. He always loved the church and had a childhood devotion to the sacred heart of Jesus. He attended Catholic schools and found a mentor in a beloved uncle who was an Augustinian. When an opportunity came to attend an Augustinian high school in Toronto, Gerald jumped at the chance. Shortly after his graduation, he followed his uncle's example and entered the Augustinians as a novice in Halifax.

As part of his novitiate, he attended university and studied English literature. Upon completing his degree and his novitiate, he took final vows and began working at a parish school in rural Nova Scotia. Over time, he began to find the work both tedious and boring. Life in community felt harsh; in the pre–Vatican II days there was a great emphasis on abnegation and self-discipline. Gerald began to lose his love for life and to question why he had undertaken such a joyless vocation. At

the age of thirty, his superior noticed his lethargy and asked him if he would consider further study. Although Gerald had not been thinking of more schooling, he believed a change would be good for him. The Augustinians felt they needed someone trained in biblical studies and so sent him off to the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto to get a PhD in New Testament studies.

To his surprise, Gerald loved studying the New Testament. The winds of change were beginning to blow in relation to biblical studies in the Roman Catholic Church. By the time *Dei Verbum* (Word of God) was issued by the Second Vatican Council in the fall of 1965, Gerald had completed his doctorate and joined a growing cadre of new Roman Catholic biblical scholars. His personal spiritual life changed dramatically with his work on St. Paul and the book of Romans. There he discovered a theological idea that was new to him—that his salvation depended solely on God's work in Christ. It was a gift of love, a grace given that he received in a new way. The idea that God was always at work, drawing him closer, relieved Gerald of a sense of burden in his religious life.

This renewed perspective on faith energized Gerald in his ministry. He was sent to teach at a high school—his alma mater—in Toronto, specifically to teach young minds about the Bible. He jumped into this work eagerly and spent over four decades teaching Bible while developing his own new interests in biblical scholarship. Among other things, in the 1970s Gerald got involved in the charismatic movement as it swept through Roman Catholic communities in Toronto. His new regard for the work of the Holy Spirit changed both his ministry with teenagers and his studies. He undertook new research about the Holy Spirit in the New Testament and became an expert in this area of scholarship.

At the age of seventy-five Gerald stepped down from his teaching role at the high school. In retirement he has undertaken a new ministry with veterans at the Sunnybrook healthcare center in Toronto, leading Sunday liturgies and offering pastoral care, when needed, to the long-term care residents. His own prayer life has become one of quiet contemplation and he finds that he is happy to spend several hours a day reading his Bible and praying.

Sarah

Sarah is forty years old and lives in St. Louis, Missouri. She grew up in Seattle, Washington, in a family that had no particular religious affiliation. Until the age of eleven she had never attended church. At that age the man who lived next door—Tom Martin—developed prostate cancer. Along with various treatments, Tom and his family undertook a series of prayer meetings in their living room, to pray specifically for his healing. The Martins invited Sarah's family to join them each week. More out of curiosity than any kind of faith, Sarah, her brothers, and her parents went to this prayer gathering every Sunday evening for over six months.

After this six months, Tom Martin passed away. His family handled his death with grace and continued to invite Sarah's family over for fellowship. Eventually, Sarah's whole family was baptized and began attending a Pentecostal church along with the Martins. Sarah eagerly participated in youth Bible studies and spent five summers at a church camp, where her faith deepened. When she moved to St. Louis after college, she found a Pentecostal church to her liking and remains a regular attendee to this day.

Sarah has had a number of career interests, mostly in paralegal fields. At the age of thirty-two, she had an opportunity to become a death row investigator for the state of Missouri. This is a job that involves cases in which persons sentenced to death are appealing their sentences. It is Sarah's job to undertake a neutral investigation to determine the facts about the case and whether there is any warrant for its reexamination. In the process she gets to know the inmates in some depth, exploring not only what happened on a given day in the past, but how it was that he or she came to commit a crime. Sarah also interviews and gets to know the families of victims of these crimes.

While Sarah is neither a social worker nor an advocate, she became quite enchanted with the stories of those on death row. The more she began to investigate, the more she was struck by the humanity of those who awaited execution. Many of them had to wait in suspense to find out if their cases would be heard again. Even if it seemed clear that there was no reprieve in sight, some had to wait for years for an execution date to be set. Sarah found many of them nevertheless to live with joy and curiosity, eager to read or paint or sew or converse or do whatever they could to make their time worthwhile.

This work added a great deal of substance to Sarah's faith. She is not naïve about the crimes committed nor the prospect of complete reform for those she interviews. But her work has given her a new sense of the humanity of everyone and she feels called to bring this humanity to light. She believes it is a God-given humanity that should not be denigrated no matter what the circumstances.

At the age of thirty-eight, a never-married single, Sarah has undertaken two new tasks. She has adopted two children from the social services in St. Louis—Jeremy who is three and Karen who is five—and has begun a writing project for inmates on death row. She encourages those on death row to write their autobiographies and she has found editors willing to help them craft their stories into publishable form. She is developing a network of publishers who are interested in bringing these stories to light. At the same time, she is developing parenting support groups to help her with her new family. Her church, her parents, and her brothers are enthusiastic about both new ventures and offer financial and emotional assistance.

Mathias

Mathias is a seventy-year-old father, grandfather and great-grandfather who lives in a village just outside Dodoma, the capital of Tanzania. He has been a faithful Anglican all his life, having attended an Anglican school when he was a child. He speaks impeccable English and jokes about the "Queen's English" and his Oxford accent. He remembers the days of colonialism when everyone aspired to imitate the British.

Mathias works as an administrator at a medical dispensary in Dodoma, walking a half hour each way to and from the bus stop in order to take the bus into the city. He and his wife of forty years live in a mud brick house on the edge of town. They have intermittent electricity and cook outside on charcoal. They are fortunate to have had the funds to put a well in their yard. Neighbors come to get water and leave them coins to pay for it. They have a well-kept pit toilet in their side yard, several goats, and half a dozen chickens.

Mathias and his wife have five children, most of whom live nearby. His one son, Emmanuel, became quite successful as a businessman in Dar es Salaam. He bought a parcel of land on the other side of Dodoma,

where he intended to build his parents a retirement home. This home, and Emmanuel's support, were to enable Mathias to retire in a few years. Unfortunately, Emmanuel passed away suddenly from a heart attack at the age of forty-eight. This was not only a great blow emotionally to Mathias, it meant that his future was now uncertain.

Mathias has been a faithful churchgoer all his life. He is immensely supportive of his local parish, attends every service there, and assists at other outlying churches as needed. He gives a large portion of his income to the church and contributes to whatever needs arise in his community. His home is often the center of village gatherings and he is looked up to when disputes arise with neighbors. His faith permeates all he does, and his love for God is apparent whenever he speaks of God.

When Emmanuel died, Mathias was saddened yet grateful. He said, "God is good and gave me forty-eight years with my wonderful son." He was proud, he was glowing, he was gracious and grateful. When it comes to concerns over his old age, he trusts in God's providence: "God must have a reason for Emmanuel's death. I am sure God knows what he is doing."

Sharon

Sharon is in her late fifties now, having grown up in Jackson, Mississippi, the third of three children in a middle-class family. Her family attended church regularly at a local Baptist congregation. They routinely went to a Wednesday night family fellowship hour. Here Sharon learned her Bible stories frontward and backward. When she was twelve, she committed her life to Christ and was baptized.

After high school, Sharon married her teenage sweetheart and began work as a bank teller. Her husband, Adam, worked as a truck driver and was gone for long periods of time. Sharon got pregnant soon after they were married and had Nathan when she was twenty. She continued to work at the bank while her mother helped take care of Nathan. Nevertheless, with Adam's long absences and the challenge of a little baby, Sharon fell into a deep depression. For so long she had been told that it was her sins that had made Jesus die on the cross; she simply assumed that her depression must be punishment of some kind. She tried and tried to be more cheerful, to stop being so selfish. But her depression

just grew. When Adam announced that he had found a trucking company in Georgia that would offer him better benefits, she was frightened but hoped that the move would make her a better wife and mother.

In Georgia Sharon was able to be a stay-at-home mom. She made friends with some of the neighbor women and joined a Bible study at the nearest church. But her depression did not subside. She attended several weekends for "women of faith" that buoyed her up for a while. Still, the Bible studies emphasized sin and the need to overcome selfishness in order to become a beautiful woman of God. Each Easter Sharon would feel more and more guilty that she was letting God down, that her sinfulness caused Jesus so much suffering.

Then Sharon discovered that her husband was having an affair. When she confronted Adam, he did not deny it but insisted that it was her fault. Had she been a more attentive wife, he would not have needed to stray. He insisted on a speedy divorce and left her with little income, though, gratefully, she did not have to fight for custody of Nathan, who was now seven.

After a period of complete disorientation, Sharon found a government program that would allow her to attend a community college. She enrolled in a small school outside Atlanta and discovered that she loved learning. She passed with flying colors and moved on to a university that accepted her credits toward a bachelor's degree. Eventually she got a degree in occupational therapy and was able to support herself and Nathan on her salary. She grew to be quite delighted with her own inquisitive nature and her newfound freedom.

In the meantime she had begun attending a United Methodist Church that was progressive with regard to women's ministry. She joined the pastoral care team and made regular visits to homebound parishioners. She participated in a Bible study that examined the women of the Bible and she discovered that they were all women with great skills and incredible courage. She grew in her trust of her church community and her trust of herself. The church did not look down on her for being divorced or being a single mom. Instead, they welcomed her and created a carpool of retired persons who could bring Nathan home from after-school activities when she had to work.

After ten years of spiritual growth and formation at this church, Sharon decided it was time for a change. She had become so beloved

as part of the pastoral care team that her pastor asked her to considered ordained ministry. Nathan was ready to leave for college himself, with a scholarship, and her parents had left her a nest egg that would support her while she went to seminary. She attended seminary in Atlanta and in the process met and married Tom, also divorced, who was himself preparing for ministry in the Methodist church. He was very supportive of her vocation and got along well with Nathan. He had grown daughters who took some time to warm up to Sharon. Sharon graduated from seminary a year before Tom, but eventually they were assigned to a circuit of country churches in eastern Tennessee. They have had a successful dual ministry ever since. Sharon's spirituality now is one of deep gratitude. She especially loves to work with women who need encouragement due to difficult circumstances.

Conclusion

This is just a sampling of the kinds of people who have discovered a relationship with God and followed it through many life stages and circumstances. While their cultures, their ages, their roles in life, and their geographies differ, nonetheless each story involves some key elements.

All of these people have a *deep longing for God*. For some, this is initially a vague orientation to learn more or experience as much as life can offer. For all, it is a desire that shifts and changes as they grow older and face new challenges. Some have experienced times when this deep yearning was lost or forgotten. In all cases, there have been vehicles of grace by which this profound desire has been nurtured and channeled; people or institutions or jobs that opened up new horizons of meaning or presented new choices to be made.

Each life story reveals an *ongoing saga of death and resurrection*. As the life cycle moves forward, old battle wounds and failures continue to resurface, to be faced, healed, and forgiven. "Death" can be the loss of a loved one or the disillusionment of a lost lifestyle. In each case the person brings his or her own humanity into the process. Body, gender, temperament, age, sexuality, intelligence, family, and culture of origin—all constitute dimensions of these persons' identities as they are transformed. For each there is some false self that tempts and tantalizes him

or her toward remaining in a narrowed framework of meaning. This false self is challenged and changed in the perpetual dying and rising that makes up the life of a Christian disciple.

At the heart of this series of transformations is *a relationship with God*. The faith of these folks has not been primarily an assent to a list of dogmas. Rather it has been a sense of relationship with God, a rapport that shifts and changes along with life circumstance. At times the nurturing love of a parental God—Father/Mother—predominates. Other times Jesus as friend and compatriot comes to the fore. A bond with the Holy Spirit sometimes takes the lead. In the times of darkness or dying, this sense of divine connection can fade. With each renewal there is a growing maturity in relationship that emerges.

All of these people find themselves in *communities of faith*. Growth in divine relationship is tied into incarnate bonds in the church. These church groups vary widely in how they spend their time nurturing faith, which vehicles of grace they emphasize—Bible study or sacraments or support groups—but without such embodied communal sharing, none of these individuals would have grown in faith.

While some people were subjected to very destructive influences from religious groups, the flourishing that comes with trusting God depends on finding a healthy church family. These church families themselves are ever shifting but each personal journey through death to resurrection is nourished by a vigorous set of companions in the faith.

This communal life incorporates, in all the stories, both a life of *worship* and a life of *service*. Again, the styles of worship vary extensively—in venue, use of music, the centrality of sacraments, preaching style, leadership structure and approach. But some kind of worship, some way of acknowledging God's greatness and of offering thanks for God's grace, is central to any communal life of faith.

The same is true of a life of service. Worship condones outward movement. Communal nurturing of faith generates the desire to share love with others. All of these narratives illustrate people whose faithfulness to God produces a sense of call, a vocation to change the world in a way most suited to their talents and resources. Most of these folks would not see themselves as involved in particularly great missions, only as doing what needs to be done in a certain place and time. The love of God simply spurs them on to turn their abilities toward systems or individuals

that need help. Service can mean prophetic witness as well as charitable acts. The point is that faith rarely stands still—it reaches out to others.

Finally, for each of these persons of faith, growth in maturity involves a move away from what we can call an "addiction to feelings" toward a *gentle acceptance of reality*. Deep, committed faithfulness comes with detachment, not in any destructive ascetic manner, but in a growing self-emptiness that is less and less dependent on feeling good about God. The deep undertow of love cultivates a quiet acceptance of whatever God offers, whether it is moments of bliss or what Ignatius of Loyola called "hard consolation." What matters is not happiness but joy, and there is recognition that joy may include sorrow and grief. Being in love with God is being embraced by God no matter what the circumstance. All that matters is abiding in God's presence.

These are all stories of *atonement*: the slow process involved in recognizing sin, both as sins committed and sins suffered, and finding its reversal in forgiveness and healing. They are stories of reconciliation, with others and with God. Atonement as outlined here may not fit with the image that we have of Jesus dying for our sins. In order to tie this life-cycle account with the resources of the Christian tradition, we need to examine carefully the ways in which earlier theologians and communities have understood this concept.