



ST. COLUMBA'S
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Will the Lights Go Out? Practicing (Sexual) Faithfulness

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1 John 4:1-8*

I was drinking my morning coffee while Ruby was stirring her rice crispy cereal this last week when she asked me: If God dies will the lights go out?

Ruby hadn't even paused. This was not a solemn moment. Breakfast did not come to a screeching halt. One moment I was thinking about how well I had done cooking the eggs, the next moment I was entertaining an earnest question about the entire cosmic structure of the universe.

This is how it is for all of us, I think. On the bus or cutting grass or fastening an earring; sometimes a thought falls like a bird on our head: *What does any of it mean? How does it all fit together, like for real?*

What makes children different from us, in part, is that they're not afraid to ask. Or rather, they're not afraid to ask in between mouthfuls of crispy rice cereal. They've not been shamed for giving expression to thoughts that are misty and undefined. They've not been conditioned to think that questions that don't

have great answers shouldn't be asked, or shouldn't be asked casually.

If God dies will the lights go out? Will the sun keep shining if God gets hit by a car; will the earth keep spinning if God meets some untimely, tragic end?

After a few moments of cross-talk about other things, the whole kitchen table had taken up Ruby's question. What is death like? We started talking about the circle of life. That when we die our bodies become food and energy that goes back into the ground and into the air and gets caught up into the bodies of other living things so that they might live too and have life.

Now about God, I said slowly, there's a lot about it that I don't understand and I'm still trying to figure out. But, I think, God is like that, living and dying and coming back to life. You taught me that Ruby when your choir sang "Roll Away the Stone"!

But here's the other thing and it's tricky. God is also not like that. There's a part of God that never dies. God was there before there was a

beginning. A great swirling power. And God will be there even after everything else is gone.



I hadn't thought then of today's passage but I wish I had. When John speaks of God's abstractness he does it in shockingly non abstract terms. Having a hard time thinking about God as all powerful and everlasting? The Alpha and Omega? That which carries on even when all time stops? Picture this, John tells us, *God is love.*

What is it like to say that you follow the impossibly abstract God? John tells us plainly, *Those who say that they love God will love their brothers and sisters.* John did not say, *Those who say that they love God can pass the Theology SATs or understand how the whole world fits together.*

Everyone who loves, John tells us, knows God; abides in God. Everyone who loves, John tells us, knows God; abides in God. Everyone.

This explanation of faith radically challenges so many of our contemporary understandings of religion. Understanding God is no harder or easier than understanding the nature of love. Understanding God is no further for any person on earth than for the one who hopes to love and be known through love.

Our sacred Christian scriptures are a thousand mile journey down the very center of the heart of love. Page after page attempting to show what John says so frankly: if you abide in love then you abide in God. Full stop.

The veil that separates Christians from other faiths, or Christians from any person, or Christians from any other thing, is no thicker than the mystery of love.

Faith is not mysterious. It is as mundane and as ordinary as the course of love. But love! Love is a great and terrible mystery!

I remember when the word "love" came to have quite a bit more significance for me than the bland stuff we had talked about when I was in Sunday School. When my parents told me that they loved me that had a certain weight, but when in junior high I fell in love with Sarah Hoff -- who lived in the next town over and was a year older than me (scandalous!) -- that had a totally different weight.

"Crush" as a description was both totally inadequate and absolutely revealing. Almost everything else in my life got squeezed out as insignificant in comparison to Sarah. Everything was throttled: excitement, embarrassment, confidence, and shame. All of it at once and all of it all the time.

Now during that time I remember my youth group pastors dedicating quite a bit of energy to what was on the table and what was off the table for teenagers in love.

A brief disclaimer. What I was taught as a child, I remember with that child's memory. There very likely was a more nuanced presentation than I remember, but what I remember being told was that actually I wasn't in love. And what was on the table for the scope of my relationship with Sarah was practically nothing at all. We were to be only friends. But I had lots of friends and what I had with Sarah was not like that.

When I was in the sixth grade I was challenged by a youth group leader to read the entire bible (who does that!?), I loved being challenged though and some time later finished it except for the Song of Solomon -- which I was told was reading only for the married.

And there was a lot of that. Deep, exciting, crushing love was sealed off for the married -- or the soon to be married. And so too was much of my body. It was sectioned off from me and others until I attained the magical status of being married. And even that was only ever described in strictly heteronormative terms.



In Rowan Williams' seminal article on faith and sexuality, titled "The Body's Grace," he suggests that grace itself is a transformation that depends on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted.

Now I have no great insight in how to talk to teenagers about their bodies and the scope of what love may mean for them. What I have realized though is that my youth group leaders were trying, understandably, to save me from the perils and risks of love.

Not just an unwanted pregnancy (and the particular cultural belief that shame must follow something like that), but rather of a different kind of risk. The kind of risk that one opens up to when we take off our masks and are laid emotionally and physically bare before another. That our most private and vulnerable aspects will be known by another person. This was a kind of hot funerance that they wanted to spare us from.

But here's the deal. As so many of you know. That kind of love -- experiencing moments of disaster or comedy or shame or success -- is in no way determined by whether one has magically entered the kingdom of marriage or not.

When we love, we risk. Period. Whether you are married or gay or transgender. There is no saving any of us from the risk that comes for someone who decides to love deeply.

If anything, the risk only deepens when we enter into long-term relationships. I can hold a facade of "having it all together" for only so long. The question in my mind about whether my partner will sustain me in love even when my faults are fully known -- where will that kind of intimacy leave us?

Rowan Williams writes, "Sexual faithfulness is not an avoidance of risk, but the creation of a context in which grace can

abound because there is a commitment not to run away from the perception of another."

Though sadly much of the Biblical imagery of marriage is deeply patriarchal, St. Paul's suggestion in 1st Corinthians that both partners surrender individual "ownership" of their bodies to one another carries a remarkable, egalitarian reevaluation of sexuality. And that image is in part what led to the earliest wedding rites in the Anglican church to have both partners exchange rings with these words,

With this Ring I thee wed, with my body
I thee worship.

John's suggestion that God is love and our church's understanding of marriage shares at least this in common. The love of God is offered unconditionally. That that is what it means to love perfectly. Where there is perfect love there is no fear. The love of God does not depend on our performance; it's just there, infinitely extended to us when we are ready to receive it.

And this is the love we hope to have with one another. That we might reveal ourselves, take off our masks, be known to one another, and not in spite of all that but because of it, there may be love. Deep, abiding love.

If we understand God this way, then Ruby's question (as she surely always knew) has the force of a freight train. *If love dies will the lights go out?* Yes, my sister they surely would. And so we must love. The light of the world depends upon it. **Amen.**