

Creation, Guts, and the Leap of Faith

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Season of Creation 4

[*Romans 8:18-28*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%208%3A18-28&version=NRSVUE)

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If you’ve walked into our church for the first time, congratulations; you’ve picked a wonderful first day! This Sunday is one of the few – perhaps the only Sunday all year – that we talk about money from the pulpit in the way I’m about to. So pull up and chair and relax. Who doesn’t like talking to strangers about money?

When I think about money and the church my mind immediately goes to two seemingly unrelated topics. –Topics that by my lights are actually deeply interwoven. Marriage and crucifixion. Marriage, as in the concept of holy matrimony. Yes, that marriage. And crucifixion, as in the torture story of Jesus on the cross. Yes, that crucifixion.

I first made this connection the second year into my marriage with Jenna. It was right around 2007 and Jenna and I were standing in the middle of a Walmart in Arkansas absolutely seething at each other. We were in graduate school and had decided to make a serious investment in our present and future health. We were there to buy an electric toothbrush. The tooth brush was outrageously expensive for us. I was used to spending like two or three dollars on a brush and a tube of paste– usually expecting them to last *at least* six months. The brush we were about to buy would cost nearly a hundred dollars. A hundred dollars for a toothbrush. But that amount was not the cause of the—let’s call it—friction between us. We had talked about the price before we arrived and we were in mutual agreement about it. The

fight broke out, in the middle of an aisle in Walmart, because of what happened next.

We carefully looked over our options, picked out the brush and nozzles we both liked, and then, as we turned to leave, Jenna grabbed another plastic $3 brush for good measure. No. No. No, man. There is a line in the sand that we simply do not cross. Something inside my mind crashed. $100 on a brush was my absolutely limit. There was no psychic space in it for one cent more. *WHAT!?* *What could we possibly need another toothbrush for!?*

From Jenna’s perspective, she was like, *I don’t know, I might want to use it sometimes*. I slowly held up the electronic brush at eye level and pointed to it: *WHY!?* *All our needs are met in this!*

And so it went. Back and forth. Neither of us raised our voices or made a public spectacle; but absolutely neither of us were going to give an inch. And our bodies seethed – seethed in a way that felt like – at the time – each of us believed that the other had committed a crime against humanity.

Some period of time later, when my mind rebooted, and it occurred to me for like the first time– for the first time with actual, lived experience – that marriage sometimes would be a very difficult thing.

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In a New York Times opinion article, entitled *Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person*, Alan de Botton tries to explain why many of us find ourselves pinched by the reality of long-haul relationships. No matter how open-eyed we enter, inevitably we fail to remember that our partners are people. People whom we can’t help but project and expect our greatest hopes. That they will anticipate both our simplest needs and our most unspoken fears.

But for de Botton we need to check our inevitable—perhaps even subconscious—slide into romanticism and “swap [it] view for a tragic (and at points comedic) awareness that every human will frustrate, anger, annoy, madden and disappoint us—and we will (without any malice) do the same to them. … But none of this is unusual or grounds for divorce. Choosing whom to commit ourselves to is merely a case of identifying which particular variety of suffering we would most like to sacrifice ourselves for.”

I read these words for the first time while in my first year of seminary—during a time when my sense that the Episcopal church—the church that I love—was not quite the idealized thing I had once dreamt. Realizing that the church itself would madden and annoy and disappoint. That it is it’s own variety of a particular way of suffering.

And it was after reading the article by de Botton that I came to better understand why St. Paul pictured the church as the bridegroom of Christ.

At the heart of any lifelong relationship as both Paul and de Botton recognize there must be sacrifice. It isn’t a question of whether there will be disagreement or frustration – in every great relationship, there will be moments in the middle of Walmart when the world seems to fall completely apart. But for de Botton, “Compatibility is an achievement of love … not [its] precondition.”

True love, abiding love, love that stirs and heals and knows – that love creates in us the possibility of truly seeing difference and bringing it into ourselves, not with judgement but generosity and mercy. Or as Paul says, Love is patient and kind; not arrogant or rude. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It is the life and teachings of Jesus that converted Paul to this hope. The sacrifice and finality of the cross. It’s what he assumes when he wrote today’s lesson.

Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. These people brought forth in their pain and yearning for some greater purpose, united in something beyond time and unmovable.

When Jesus sees the hungry masses in Mark 6 our text says that he had compassion for them, but the most literal translation of those words is that when he saw the poor his guts were ripped out. So great are the needs of the world that when we pray we do not know the words to say; yet the Spirit is there, interceding—speaking—for us in sighs too deep for words. Paul writes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves … groan inwardly while we wait for the redemption of our bodies.”

This new creation is the spiraling heart of the love of Jesus. That spiraling heart that bears all things; that’s willing to encounter frustration and disappointment—maddingly stubborn and difficult people—and return not conflict but redemption.

We take ourselves unknown and unseen; we peer in to find that hidden self and pour out every drop of mercy we can find. Our bodies groan for this. Paul gives a sweeping picture of action towards justice not just for our own bodies but for the entire ecology and all creatures within it.

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These people, this church—welcoming the poor in our midst, welcoming the needs of each other, laying our hands on one another and praying—these are the children of God. Creation waits with eager longing for us, for what we are called to become.

Today we ask that you make a leap of faith. This project exists here in this neighborhood, in this small corner of the world, only because of what you can generously pledge. We have taken these great, uncompromising values and turned them into material form. In the form of this building, in the form of these people on staff, in the form of our ministries and mission.

We have heard the call of Jesus. We have lain our bodies out, stretched them in vulnerability and tenderness. As a church we have thrown ourselves out there in this cosmic hope that we may play some small role in answering the groaning calls of creation. This great mission of God’s love and mercy and justice.

Today we underline how important it is that you leap with us. That your financial gift be just as stretched and expansive and wild.

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In the bulletin you’ll find two inserts. Both hopefully will assist in your pledge. One card is the how -- for you and your phone or computer. The other is for your refrigerator or office.

It’s the earliest known image of Jesus’ crucifixion, made sometime in 2nd Century. Fittingly the earliest image is made in mock graffiti, very likely one enslaved person meaning to mock the religion of another. It reads in Greek, *Alexamenos celebrates God* – or more plainly, *Alexamenos worships God*. Alex is there on the left, likely in a slave’s tunic, raising his hand up to a caricature of Jesus, with the head of a donkey, on the cross.

Which particular variety of suffering will you choose to sacrifice yourself for? In this place we speak the love of God. A groaning. A yearning. Too deep for words.

[And, yes, I’m still using our electronic truth brush.] Amen.