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The Possibility of Love

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A few months ago my wife Lois gave birth to the most handsome baby boy I've ever seen. Matthew is our first child, and the whole thing is turning into what we in education call "a learning experience."

One thing I have learned is that an infant is most assuredly the center of his universe. Everything revolves around him. He is, as far as he is concerned, the only center of attention. His every need becomes the deep concern of those around him and, from his perspective, the sequence of need-satisfaction is of cosmic significance, the only cosmic issue. Adults not only bend over backwards to serve him, trying instantly to placate him (though at 2:00 a.m. there is a time-delayed reaction, an irreverence he notes in no uncertain terms), they crumble in his presence, even the most dignified regressing to the "coo-coo, kitchey-goo" baby-talk stage in an (only partly successful) effort to communicate with him. If he could conceptualize, he would think of himself as the *center*; everything else revolves around him and exists only in relation to his needs and the satisfying of them. What a life!

But things will change. A Copernican revolution will soon take place, a psychological reorientation that for my son will make the historical Copernican revolution pale in significance. He will soon learn – is beginning already, in fact – that there are other centers-of-attention in the universe, that his needs and wants must be coordinated with those of others, that he is one among many equals, that he must be as interested in their welfare as they are in his.

I suspect that this "psychological Ptolemaic crisis" – which we all had to go through – will not be easy. There will be at least as much resistance as there was during the historical Copernican Revolution. I imagine one crucial task of parenthood is to see to it that this reorientation takes place as painlessly as possible, but to see to it that it *does* take place. (We all know people for whom the reality of the reorientation has not yet sunk in – maybe it never does completely for any of us; we all on occasion act as if we are and should be the social-gravitational center of the universe.)

So far I have put this all in psychological terms, making claims about an inevitable psychological reorientation for my infant son. In the second great commandment Jesus in effect says that this reorientation is a moral and religious *duty*. We are to love those around us as we love ourselves. We have the obligation, whether or not we have the tendency, to perceive others as centers-of-attention, as intrinsically deserving of our concern, as ends-in-themselves and not simply means to our ends.

It is commonplace by now to notice that Jesus did not say we are to love others *instead* of ourselves. We all know people for whom the more basic problem is not that

they do not love others, but that they do not love themselves. In fact, Jesus seemed to imply that you cannot properly love others unless you properly love yourself. If you do not love yourself enough, or if you love yourself in the wrong way, you probably are incapable of fulfilling the second great commandment, incapable of having the sort of I-thou relationship that requires honest-to-goodness individuals on both sides of the relationship.

Notice another important aspect of Jesus' command. He does not say that you are to love your neighbor as *much* as you love yourself, but in the *way* that you love yourself. I have checked on this point with a number of authorities, and there is no question but that if the writer wanted to say "as much as" he would have used an entirely different phrase in the original language. The correct translation is: "Love your neighbor in the *way* that you love yourself."

This point is worth noting because it does not take us long to realize that some of our neighbors are just not as lovable as we are. It is impossible for us to love them as much as we love ourselves. And since we all, on a practical level, operate with Immanuel Kant's dictum that you do not have an obligation to do what is impossible for you to do, a misinterpretation of Jesus' command here actually weakens it. Since we see that we cannot keep it anyway, at least with respect to some people, we have a tendency to forget about it, at least with respect to those people.

Now I do not intend to separate the quantity of our love from its quality; how *much* we love ourselves is related to the *way* that we love ourselves. But though we cannot separate the amount that we love from the way that we love, we can distinguish them. And the practical point is that even if I cannot love someone quite as *much* as I love myself, I have not escaped the Christian obligation to love that person in the *way* that I love myself.

So the real question we face, when we seek to follow Christ's command, is "How do I love myself?" The answer to this question determines our obligation to our neighbors. Again, we must be careful. Some people love themselves unwisely; it would be unfortunate if they loved their neighbors the way they love themselves. So let us take a normal, rational, well-adjusted human-being – myself for example – and let us ask how that person loves himself. How do I love me, let me count the ways.

Actually, as you have already inferred, there is an embarrassingly large number of ways that I love myself. (This could take a while.) For one thing, I am very sympathetically understanding of myself. When I do something worthwhile, I am the first to recognize it. I do not hesitate to congratulate myself. On the other hand, when I pull a blunder, when I do something stupid, even wicked, I am quite forgiving of myself. I can list any number of extenuating circumstances, mitigating elements that make the mistake seem all too "human." What a change in my life there would be if I were to always love others in this same way, even apart from the same amount.

I could go on, listing all the little ways (and big ones) that I am enamored of myself. But in the remaining space I would like to mention what is perhaps the most basic way that I love myself, a way that is perhaps the motivation for my sympathetic understanding of myself, as well as for the other ways I appreciate myself.

This way is what Longfellow had in mind when he said that we judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done.

Others might have me “pinned and wriggling on the wall,” categorizing me solely by what I have done, and been. But when I think of myself, my overarching category is that of *possibility*. I define myself, not just by my accomplishments and failures, but by what I have been, but by what I can be, what I hope to be, by my potentialities, capabilities, possibilities. When I cease doing that I will be dead, spiritually if not physically. I see myself as coming from a past, but as oriented toward a future, a future that I, at least to some extent, can choose.

I once knew a little boy. When he was seven years old, this boy made a mistake that left a deep impression on him. He walked into a drug store and tried to steal some penny candy. He was unsuccessful, but instead of being reported to the police was made to go home and tell his parents what he had done. This task was the most difficult he had ever faced. He had fleeting thoughts of breaking his arm on purpose, of running in front of a car, of doing anything that would relieve him of the dreadful conversation with his parents. But the conversation took place. The boy’s father had one immediate reaction: “My son is a criminal.” Those words cut to the heart. They were terrible, but they were true: seven years old—a criminal. But the boy’s weeping mother took only a few seconds to respond to that verdict: “My son is not a criminal; he’s going to be a preacher.” (This was before she knew that one could be both.)

As you have guessed, I was that boy, and my mother’s response was a lesson in love. My father loved me too, loved me enough to say what was true. I had done something that, at that moment, defined me as a thief. But he did not say the whole truth; my mother saw the *possibility* in me, saw what I could do, and not just what I had done. Now it turns out that both of them were wrong (so far), but the way that my mother loved me then taught me much about how to love myself.

My mother’s lesson has special relevance to a Christian college. One seemingly unchangeable fact about educational institutions is that people (students and faculty) get categorized, ranked, graded, generally in terms of what they have done. Students learn new and important ways of understanding themselves and others; these ways invariably involved classifications, such as “introvert,” “extrovert,” “hedonist,” and “utilitarian.” But if faculty and students are to increase in love, as well as understanding, we must never forget to see past the actuality in each of us, to see the possibilities, to cultivate the potential. All educational institutions *should* do this; the one who is Lord at St Olaf *demand*s it. We love ourselves in this way, and we must love others as we love ourselves.

I have yet to say something about the first great commandment—the love for God. If you are thinking ahead, you have already seen the problem. God is sometimes defined by philosophical theologians as pure actuality, as a being who changes not, as one in whom it is blasphemy to see unrealized possibilities. If the way we love ourselves and others is by seeing our (as yet unrealized) possibilities, how can we love such a being? This may be just a problem for philosophical theologians, for those who prefer to define God before they love him. On the other hand, notice that Jesus did not say that we should love God as we love ourselves; rather, we are to love him with all our heart, mind, and soul. That phrase alone indicates that the love of God cannot be in *addition* to our love for our neighbor; if we think quantitatively here, there would be no love left over for our neighbors or ourselves. Apparently our love for God must be *integrated* with our love for ourselves and our neighbors. How is this to be done?

I do not have a complete answer, but I ask you to engage in a thought experiment. The experiment derives from the following questions: “Where do we receive the spiritual resources to be able to love ourselves and our neighbor? In the striving of life, how are we able to focus on what can be, instead of simply what is and has been? How is it possible to emphasize the possible?”

Here is the thought experiment: Suppose there were a person who always saw the possibilities in you, who always forgave you for what you are and who constantly, sympathetically challenged you to become what you should be. And suppose this person is not just anyone, but is a person to whom you and everyone else is ultimately responsible. Would not such a person enable you to discover the power of love, to realize the truth of the claim that only the loved can love? Would not such a person be loved *in* your love for yourself and for others? If so, then in devotion to that person you would love yourself and your neighbor as you love yourself. And that would be something truly awesome, something that could help my son Matthew make that incredible reorientation he is going to have to make.