

Loving the World as God Loves the World

Our desires to save the world, on one hand, and to savor it, on the other, can be reconciled only in God's love.

Vern Barnet

A dear friend asked me, "How have you changed since you became an Episcopalian?" He knew about my life- and career-long interest in world religions. He knew I still cherished Buddhist, Muslim, American Indian and other spiritual paths.

1. Closer to Tears

My friend knew I do not approach world religions "cafeteria-style," choosing this feature from one religion and that idea from another. I embrace each faith fully. One can relish both Rembrandt and Mapplethorpe, and find enchantment in both the Parthenon and the Taj Mahal. One is not violated by enjoying both a Mozart opera and a tune by Steely Dan. Somehow I've escaped the literalistic curse of thinking that religions must be mutually exclusive. Still, he found the commitment I made in 2011 by being baptized a Christian quite puzzling.

"Well," my answer stumbled out, "by seeking to follow the example of Jesus with my whole heart, particularly through a kind of ongoing dialogue between ardent worship and the choices before me everyday, I've come to understand the creeds as pointers to the geography of life, with its horrors and

its glories, manifested in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

"That's pretty abstract. Give me one specific example of how you have changed," he demanded.

"I've noticed that I cry a lot more easily," I confessed. "Sometimes I weep just sitting in the pew and watching the acolyte prepare the candles, a reassurance that out of all the ugliness and misunderstandings of the human condition, the folks gathering for worship need, as I do, to recognize the sacred and align ourselves anew with the Power that gives us hope and life abundant.

"Sometimes I am full of laughter as the service begins, but perhaps my eyes moisten when I see a parent and child taking communion at the altar rail — a fresh vision of the flow of generations, responding with varying degrees of illumination to the same call that Isaiah heard, in Chapter 6 of his book.

"I'm not prescribing behavior for anyone else, just reporting that both in church and throughout the week, I seem closer to tears, a little less hard-boiled. I've a long way to go to emulate the love and compassion and embrace of Jesus; but however small the improvement, I like myself better."

2. Compassion Fatigue

Still, when I saw the news about the gun slaughter at the Orlando night club, and again the attack at the Istanbul airport (where I have been), my first reaction was to shut down emotionally, just as I did immediately after Sandy Hook, Columbine, Charleston, Virginia Tech, and so many other tragic events.

No tears. "Well, what can we expect with the Supreme Court's Second Amendment ruling?" the analyst in me said aloud in anger. I thought about the year when I was responsible for obtaining the names of those killed in gun violence in Kansas City each week, and how emotionally weary I became adding them to the prayer list. My first reaction to Orlando was disgust that so

many political leaders seem to be owned by the N.R.A. even though the public favors measures to reduce our orgies of violence.

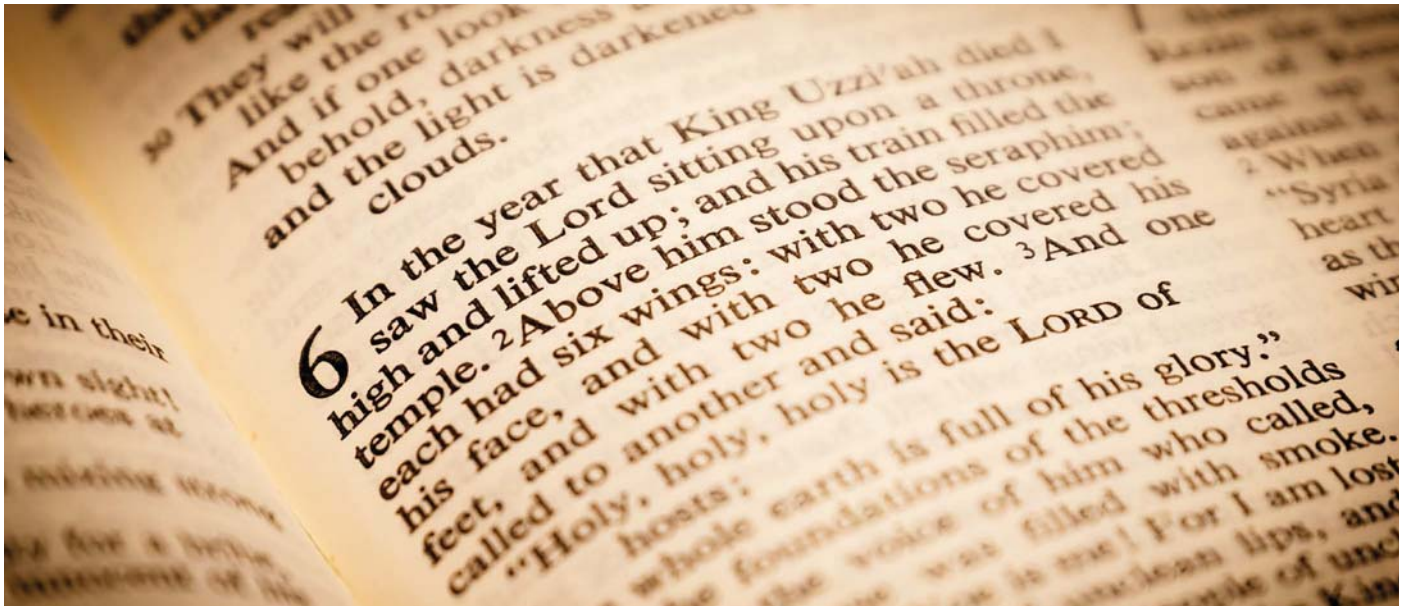
As the news continued, I recognized my "compassion fatigue," but God's love never falters. God became human to suffer as we do. Finally I began to weep.

There is so much to weep about, the refugee crisis, the fires, the floods, the accidents, and the impaired health of those we love. Usually I put these things out of mind. But sometimes I look at the obituaries and see a young person I do not even know whose life has been snuffed out, and I start to weep.

3. A Sonnet of Desire

I've been puzzling why, in a contest held at a Kansas City library for the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, one sonnet from my book, "Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire" (see "love Locket" opposite) was more popular with a broad range of racially diverse readers. The young and old,

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Isaiah 6 - Revised Standard Version

gay and straight, professional and amateur, of several faiths.

While the sonnet is in perfect Shakespearean form, I don't think it is my best. I don't think it is particularly easy, either. No one has given me a plausible reason for its being selected most. But in thinking about the six presentations from my book this summer at St. Andrew's and at Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral, I'm exploring one – possibly unconscious – dynamic that may explain its favored status.

The sonnet may appear at first to be about a merely human love relationship gone sour. The speaker chooses to confine the love to a locket because it is so overwhelming, just as we; fatigued by compassion, sometimes shut down our feelings in order to get on with our lives.

Then, in line nine, a forecast, using images from different faiths. The rapture in which the dead and living in Christ are "caught up in the clouds" to be eternally united in His kingdom is from 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In ancient Confucian thought, society would be set right

Love Locket

This loud and too large love I have for you
I now reduce to this small, silent space,
and set it in a locket, safe from view,
and wear it to confine you to a place.
You overran my life and skinned my soul;
my strong physique became a bag of woe;
your gravity made me a damn black hole;
you made my moil a comic video.

When rapture judges with the trumpet's blare,
and when Maitreya stirs within my breast,
when Emperors will bow to South, aware,
or when Messiah comes and gives us rest,

this locket forged on anvil from pure ire
will melt from love within, and God's desire.

by imitating the emperor honoring the gods by bowing to the South where they reside. In some Buddhist thought, the bodhisattva Maitreya is the future Buddha. Some Jews look for a Messiah who will establish the rule of Israel to bring peace to the world. All examples point to hope beyond the present distress, a desire that the mess of our world will be transformed.

But the couplet, the last two lines, if read closely, though phrased in the future, subverts itself when we contemplate "God's desire."

God offers us now both the cross and life abundant. That's the package for this life, both to redeem the suffering around us and to take pleasure in God's gifts. We can bring comfort to disaster. We can find joy in duty to the world.

Ambrose of Milan wrote that we are simultaneously condemned and saved. Perhaps he meant that love brings both suffering and ecstasy. If we desire to know God, then choosing to love the world as it is, as God does, with all its evil, is, in a sense, our present salvation.

Religious maturity is found in desiring to love as God loves. Julian of Norwich wrote that it is God who teaches us to desire, and that He is the reward of all true desiring, and that all shall be well. When the locket confining our love of the world melts, we are raptured, Maitreya stirs, the Emperors bow, the Messiah comes; and then, in tears or laughter or quiet presence, our desire is released and the Glory of God appears. +

Vern Barnet's earlier book, edited with three others, is "The Essential Guide to Religious Traditions and Spirituality for Health Care Providers."