

Grow up: Inspired by bursting hearts

Lessons: 1 John 4:7-9, 11-12,18-21

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20John%204:7-9,%2011-12,18-21>

This time of year, I recycle a lot of mail. I pick up the key, walk out to the curb, and unlock the mailbox while carefully bracing my hand against the opening to prevent spillage. Then I walk directly to the recycling bin and sort it.

In the fall, most of the pieces I receive and routinely recycle are either asking me to vote a particular way on a particular issue, or are requests for money for worthy and not-so-worthy causes. Unlike a personal letter, each piece of mail asks me to take action of one kind or another. Each one asks me to do something – not merely think about something, but do something – like voting for or voting against or writing and mailing a check.

This time of year, most of my mail consists of requests for me to *act* – to do something. And most of it I recycle immediately, without even reading it.

I don't read it because the sheer volume of it overwhelms me. And I'm not even talking about the requests and stories I receive by email. It's too much even to think about, much less to act on. The starving children in Africa, the homeless men in Los Angeles, the abandoned dogs and cats of New Orleans – it's just too much, all at once.

The problem with it being too much, or with being overwhelmed, is that, rather than take a bunch of small actions, we take no action at all. All those flyers and postcards and pleas we get in the mail become no more than a big wad of paper. Each of them asks us to take action, and the only action we wind up taking is throwing them all away.

Do you ever have that feeling of “too much”? Of being overwhelmed by the world's need? When it happens to me, I feel frozen to my spot. Paralyzed. Do you have that? When I think about the desolation of Bangladesh, or even the hopelessness of our state prisons, if I am able to picture it at all, it's just too much to comprehend, much less take action on.

When I freeze up like that, it reminds me that I'm not Jesus. Jesus didn't seem to have that problem. I'm not saying he didn't get overwhelmed: there are plenty of times in the gospels that Jesus needs some alone time and goes off to pray by himself. But the amount of need Jesus saw – and the compassion he allowed himself to feel – didn't paralyze him. All the need he saw in the crowds and in the lepers and in you and in me didn't keep him from taking action. In fact, seeing and feeling seemed to move Jesus to take action.

We know that Jesus stood looking at the crowds and felt compassion¹. When he looked at the crowd he didn't see a clump of causes, he saw his neighbors, and he loved them. He felt the pain, he felt the love, and he was moved to take action. Jesus was spiritually mature: He felt the pain, felt the love, and was moved to take action.

Holy action comes out of feeling the pain and feeling the love. Love is not simply warm fuzzy feelings. Love is active. Love is actively willing and working for the good of another. Even if you don't like them very much.

¹ Matthew 9:36.

If compassionate pain is the feeling of your heart breaking, active love is the experience of your heart bursting.

The reading we heard this morning tells us that the only way to see God is to see love in action. We cannot see God; we can only see God expressed in the world through acts of love. That's what Jesus was – God's love in flesh and action. And as his followers, we're supposed to be love in action too. We're supposed to help people see God in us by being love in action.

There are a lot of reasons we don't live as love in action: self-centeredness, distraction, greed, need. But I think one of the big reasons we don't grow up spiritually and live as Jesus did – in compassionate action – is fear.

We get afraid. I said earlier that one of the big differences between Jesus and us is that Jesus wasn't paralyzed by compassion overload. But most of us do shut down at some point. We shut down out of fear that compassion itself will destroy us. We are afraid of the pain of compassion. We are afraid to love.

Far too many of us get stuck in our fear – our fear that once we start something we won't be able to complete it. Our fear that if we help one person we'll have to help another. Our fear that we'll be made fools of. Our fear that we'll get lost.

So the key to being the face of God in the world is to get past the fear. If you want to be able to take action – if you want to be able to give all you are to God – you have to get past the fear.

There's only one way past the fear. Love of God. The love of God destroys fear. When you truly love God, as Jesus did, your love enables you to trust God. When you trust God, you become less afraid of your compassion. When you trust God, all those feelings of compassion don't overwhelm you, because you trust God to be working harder on all that need than you are. When you love God, you realize deep down that God is working in the world even harder than you are.

When you love God, really love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, there is no room for fear. Fear is cast out. Fear is banished. You cannot be full of love and full of fear.

Loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength casts out fear, and instills trust and increases your compassion. Jesus could stand there, loving the crowds, feel compassion, and act on it because he truly and deeply loved and trusted God. His love and trust of God allowed him to act from that love, and lay down his life. His love of God cast out fear, which enabled compassion for us, which allowed him to freely act. His love set him free to act.

This is why we have to practice loving and trusting God. We practice loving and trusting God through prayer, worship, reading Scripture, and tithing or giving. Those practices of loving and trusting God – prayer, worship, reading Scripture, and tithing or giving – make us better lovers of people. The more perfect we become at loving, the less we fear, and the better action we are able to take.

My own experience is that the only way to learn to love God completely is to realize and accept, without shame, without guilt, that God loved you first. When you accept and take in everything God has done for you, it's hard not to love God in return. And the love of God takes away fear.

And God loves you completely. God loves you no matter what. Even when you fall and fail. Even you. God in Christ loves even you.

So what about that loving your neighbor part? Loving your neighbor isn't actually about responding to every request for help. Loving your neighbor isn't about leaping to assuage your guilt. Guilt and compassion are not the same thing.

If you want to learn to love, really love, your neighbor, start with your heartbreak. Start with what really moves you to compassion. What is it that kills you to think about? Who brings tears to your eyes? When you look at the crowds, who breaks your heart? Who needs to see the love of Jesus in you?

If you don't know what your heart break is, start with what makes your heart burst — what brings you pride and joy. When you are doing what you love to do, what is it? What can you do for hours without noticing the time? When does your heart sing? That's your heartburst.

In that place where your heart break and your heart burst meet, you will find your purpose.

Your ministry, your calling, is found when you discover what in the world can make your heart break, and what makes your heart burst with joy. To love as Jesus loved, to lay down all you are in love, you have to let yourself be inspired by your heart burst.

Now, if you just want to keep busy, or push down your guilt, or be known as a do-gooder, you can simply run hither and yon asking, "What does the world need?" or "What does my church need?" and then doing that, whether you have any gift or calling for it at all. It's a sure recipe for bitterness and burnout, and I don't recommend it. But it can be done.

But if you want to learn to love, and to act on that love, and to be fully used by God to bring about the kin-dom of justice, peace, and love, I urge you instead to discover who makes your heart break, and what makes it burst.

The Christian pastor and civil rights leader Howard Thurman put it this way: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." The world needed Jesus to come alive, and the world needs you to come alive too. Be inspired by your heartbreak and your heartburst.

Or, as Frederick Buechner, the Christian writer and teacher, put it: The vocation for you is the one in which your deep gladness and the world's deep need meet.²

Learn to love by letting yourself be inspired by the world's deep need and your deep gladness. Be moved by your heartbreak, and inspired by your heartburst. Where your heartbreak and heartburst meet, that's where your mission lies. That's where you will fulfill God's purpose for you. That's where you will come alive. And the world needs you to come alive. The world needs Jesus to come alive through you.

I want to close today with a story from Chuck Colson. Chuck Colson, you may recall, was Richard Nixon's chief counsel, and went to prison for his crimes during that administration. While in prison, he experienced Jesus, and found forgiveness and redemption in Jesus' love. Since his release decades ago, Colson has devoted most of his life to prison ministry. Colson is a man redeemed by God.

"Where is the hope?" Colson has written. "The hope that each of us has is not in who governs us, or what laws we pass, or what great things we do as a nation. Our hope is in the power of God working through the hearts of people. And that's where our hope is in this country. And that's where our hope is in life."

² Frederick Buechner, (interviewed by Bob Abernathy, *Religion & Ethics*, April 5, 2006, for PBS)

In what I'm about to read you, Colson was asked why he laid down his former life, and he spoke of his heartbreak and his heartburst. In his heartbreak and in his heartburst, Colson found the love that casts out fear. This is what Colson said, "I've been in 700 prisons in 49 countries. I was in prison this morning, and it was great to see men coming to know Christ. Of course, the prisons are rotten holes.

I've been in places in South America where you slip on the sewage coming out of the cells. I've been in prisons in Zambia where the men haven't anything to wear or eat, and your heart breaks.

People say to me, 'Why do you keep doing this? Why do you keep going back and back and back to these prisons?'

I do it because it is my duty, out of gratitude to God, for what he has done in my life. I can do nothing else."

Let us pray: God, when we stop and allow ourselves to think about all you have done for us, your love floods our hearts. We are filled with gratitude. Our hearts burst with love. Open us to our heart break — to the people who need to be touched by you, to those who move us to the pain of compassion. Send us into the heart break, and let us emerge inspired by our bursting hearts that want to show your love to others. Grow us up, Lord, so that others may see you in us. Through Jesus Christ, we pray.

Amen.