

Healing Our Image of God and Ourselves

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For Alive Communications' Authors and Industry Executives

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In the words of Francis of Assisi when he met Brother Dominic on the road to Umbria, "Hi."

My hometown is Brooklyn, New York, and for the past 25 years I've been a transplanted Yankee living in the Deep South, still trying to learn how to say "*Haa, wha, and mah oh mah!*"

I'm sure you know that Brooklyn is the largest Jewish community in America. I grew up surrounded by Jewish culture, Jewish values, and Jewish spirituality. To this day, two of my closest friends are Jewish. And so over the years one of my hobbies has been the study of Yiddish humor. There are some wonderful stories in the Yiddish tradition.

While I was out in Medford, Oregon, I met a Messianic Jew -- a completed Jew from Flatbush, a neighborhood in Brooklyn. She told me a story of Alan, the tailor:

One day Alan was walking down the street, and he meets Moisha the banker, and asks where he's going.

"*Synagogue,*" Moisha says, looking horribly distraught.

"Why?"

"*I've gotta talk to the Rabbi.*"

"Why you've gotta talk to the Rabbi?" Alan asks.

"Aye," says Moisha, "*A terrible thing has happened! My son become a Christian.*"

"Oh, Moisha," says Alan, "Let me tell you a very funny thing. *MY* son is a Christian!"

The two of them arrive at the synagogue and open the door. Out comes the Rabbi who says, "Moisha, Alan, what is going on?"

Alan says, "We got a catastrophe in our families. Our two sons become Christians."

"Into my office!" says the Rabbi. "Lock the door."

After a long pause he looks up and says, “Let me tell you a very funny thing. *MY* son is a Christian.”

“No!” says Alan.

“*We are lost!*” says Moisha. “*What are we going to do, Rabbi? You the Answer Man!*”

“Yes, we do something,” says the Rabbi. “Come with me.”

So they march across the synagogue and into the sanctuary.

The Rabbi says, “Kneel. Shut Up. I pray. ‘Yahweh, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God of Israel, God of the Prophets, what on earth is going on? Judaism is gone down the tube. Everyone’s becoming a Christian! Yahweh give us a word. Yahweh speak a voice to us.’”

Long pause. Finally God says, “Let me tell you a very funny thing...”

And it’s in the name of that Jewish Rabbi that we gather here this afternoon fully aware that any form of anti-Semitism is Christian spit on the face of our Jewish Savior.

Over the past several years my ministry has been identified, more than anything else, with healing our image of God and ourselves. My books like *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, *Abba’s Child*, *Ruthless Trust*, *The Wisdom of Tenderness* and others have aimed at dispelling illusions and myths about an unreal God and helping people to experience the God of Jesus Christ. This, by the way, I believe, is the main business of Christianity. It is not a matter of simply learning how to think properly about God, but of actually experiencing him.

Losing our illusions is difficult, because illusions are the stuff that we live by. The Spirit of God is the great un-masker of illusions; the great destroyer of icons and idols. God’s love for us is so great that he would not permit us to harbor false images, no matter how much they seem to comfort us. God strips away those falsehoods, because it is better to live naked in truth than clothed in fantasy.

Throughout the course of Christian history, down to the present day, there persists this chronic temptation to reduce God to a human dimension, to express him in clear ideas. Human reason seems to want to understand everything, penetrate everything, reduce everything to its own clear, conceptual thought. It’s a noble enterprise, but in so doing we rob God of his otherness and confine him to a world of our own mental limits.

In the 13th Century, Thomas Aquinas warned us of this when he wrote, “If you comprehend God, he is not God. A comprehended God is no God at all.” In the same vein today, the Zen master says, “If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.” That is, if you think you’ve comprehended the Buddha, destroy your comprehension of him. The secret of the mystery is: God is always greater. No matter how great we think him to be, God is always greater because God is GOD! In the most literal sense of the word he is unique, uncreated, infinite, totally other than we are. He surpasses and transcends all human concepts, considerations and expectations. He is beyond anything we could intellectualize or imagine. And that is why God will always be a scandal to men and women -- because he cannot be comprehended by the rational, scientific, finite mind.

With these brief remarks as an introduction, I invite you this afternoon to stretch. The key operative phrase in this presentation is “stretch your mind; stretch your heart.” If necessary, renounce the security of an unexamined faith. Let go of all merely human concepts of justice, mercy, love, rectitude, fair play. If necessary, let go of everything you’ve heard all your life about God and find your own understanding of the Holy One rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What was the message of Jesus Christ concerning God? What did he really preach? What did he really teach? And what did he really mean? Well, biblical scholars today tell us that if we want to be most confident that we are in touch with the original message of Jesus, then we should turn to His parables -- quick, decisive stories that make clear the fundamental points of His teaching. For our purposes right now, we are going to briefly turn first to Matthew 20, the parable of the crazy farmer.

As you recall, it’s harvest time. Work is plentiful, and every morning the farmers go out into the marketplace, which is the hiring area of the day, to recruit workers for His fields. Now, given the time of year and the amount of work available, one can assume (at least the great Lutheran biblical scholar, Joachim Jeremias, tells us we can assume) that those who are still idle in the day, making small talk at the eleventh hour (5 P.M. in the afternoon), were a lazy and shiftless bunch. Nevertheless, the farmer needed all the help he could get, and he recruits them, too. We can further assume that the eleventh-hour workers took their time getting out to the field, shuffled around a lot, and did very little work. But at pay time they received a full day’s pay.

Now, those to whom Jesus was telling the story found that the ending had a very sharp twist. In this familiar Rabbinic parable (meaning other Rabbis of Jesus' time told a similar story), and in their version those who worked for one hour got a whole day's pay because they worked so hard in that hour. But in the version of Jesus, the emphasis is not on the diligence of the workers, but on the gratuitous generosity of the farmer. It was a mad, crazy, insanely generous act. No firm or a businessman in the year 2007 could indulge in such reverent generosity and remain in business very long.

Suppose you own a company with 100 workers. Ninety of them work a 40-hour week, and the other 10 come in at 4 p.m. Friday afternoon and they work for one hour until 5 p.m. Then at pay time you give them all the same wage of \$2,000 for their week's work. Your partners, your colleagues, even your family would say, "Your cheese just slid off your cracker! You're not playing with a full deck, man! That's not only crazy; that's unjust!" And that's the response of the workers in Matthew 20. They go to the foreman and say, "See here. This is grossly unfair! We're out here all day long in the scorching heat, and you're paying these latecomers the same wage as you pay us. That is unjust." And the farmer replies, "My friends, I do you no injustice. Did we not agree to the wage of a dollar a day? Take your pay and go. Am I not free to do as I like amongst my own? Or are you envious because I am generous? I am telling you: The last will be first, and the first last."

As I travel throughout the United States, speaking in a wide ecumenical setting of churches, college campuses and universities -- Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, Moravian, Quaker -- I'm appalled. I'm appalled by the number of American Christians who are scandalized by the generosity of God. "We're in, but they're out. By God, they're out."

In the last play he wrote before his death, the great French playwright, Jean Anouilh, describes the Last Judgment as he sees it. The good guys, the just, are standing before the gate of Heaven. They're keyed up, bursting with impatience to claim their reserved seats. They can't wait to go marching in, when suddenly a rumor starts. "Look, look, he's gonna forgive THEM, too! What, *THEM*?! After all I've been through? They get forgiven? I can't believe it!" Exasperated, they worked themselves into a fury, and they start cursing God. And that was the Last Judgment, you see. They judged themselves. Excommunicated themselves.

God appeared in Jesus in the form of an infinite, boundless, extravagant mercy, and they refused to acknowledge him. *I want nothing to do with Heaven, if every Tom, Dick and Harry can get in. I spurn this so-called Messiah who is letting them all off.* And because they could not transcend the limits of their own finite expectations of who the Messiah should be, they could not recognize him in Jesus.

And the same theme is replayed in what the scholars call the pearl of the parables. In Luke 15, you recall the life of the prodigal son is a life of waste, squandering, boozing and womanizing. And he returns home not to the expected condemnation but to a merciful arrival, as his father goes running, stumbling, falling down the road. When he sees his wasted son he does not demand, “Where’ve you been? What’ve you been up to?” But he falls on his neck, kisses him, puts a ring on his finger, puts him in a robe with sandals on his feet, and says, “Kill the fatted calf, we’re gonna party for 14 days!” Hardly an appropriate way to treat a delinquent kid. You mean the kid is spoiled rotten in the beginning, and his dad is spoiling him rotten again? He’s never gonna change. That’s crazy behavior!

Have you ever identified with the older brother in this story, muttering to himself, “That rat fink didn’t get back until he was good and ready! All this time I stay home fattening a calf that my father’s now gonna roast for that dork? I mean, I believe in being kind, too, but this is off the wall! My father’s wacko!” At any rate, the older brother, a serious hard-working man, didn’t like it one bit. He saw love, and he grew indignant. He saw his father’s indiscriminate compassion, and it made him angry.

If you ever have the opportunity to spend Easter in France -- whether it’s in a large metropolitan area like Paris, Bordeaux, Dijon, or the little village I lived in for six months in Farlette -- on Easter morning, you’ll see this one phrase written on the sides of buildings, the backs of buses. It’s in block print, it’s in script, it’s graffiti, but the same phrase is recited, sung, chanted in all the Christian churches. In fact, on Easter morning, when Christians pass in the street, they exchange this phrase as a greeting: “**L’amour de Dieu est la sottise. L’amour de Dieu est la sottise! L’AMOUR DE DIEU EST LA SOTTISE!**” The love of God is folly, folly, foolish, crazy! **JESUS IS A “FOLLY” THAT CALLS FOR JOY!**

In Matthew 20, the farmer is appalled. The workers won’t celebrate his generosity. In Luke 15, the father of the prodigal is broken-hearted. His brother would

not come to the celebration. Jesus is saying that God is extravagantly loving, and he calls for a joyous response in us. These two parables, my brothers, are both a revelation of the real God in Jesus, and a call to conversion from us. Jesus' image of God assaults our invulnerable standards of justice, mercy, love, rectitude, fair play. The very foundations of our religion are being shaken!

The depraved, good-for-nothing prodigal, loved equally as his older harder-working brother? Celebration instead of punishment? What kind of lunatic justice is this that abolishes all of our sacred standards, reverses all order of rank, makes the last first, and the first last? And in the end all get the same reward?

I am not a Universalist. I want to make that abundantly, luminously clear. Universalism is a heresy that makes the death and resurrection of Christ irrelevant. But the key operative word here this afternoon is "stretch." Stretch your mind; stretch your heart to accommodate the God embodied in Jesus of Nazareth.

The parables of Jesus portray a God who is consistently overgenerous with his forgiveness and his grace. In Matthew 18, Jesus says that his God is like a magnanimous King who reduces debt the size of our national deficit. In Luke 7, Jesus says his God, once again, is a lender, generously canceling debt (in this case, the lifetime sins of a prostitute). In John 10, Jesus says his God does a very foolish thing. He leaves the flock of 99 unprotected, while he goes out in search of one lost and lonely sheep. In Luke 18, Jesus says that his God hears the prayers of slum lords, drug dealers, hookers, or in first century Palestine, tax collectors and prostitutes. Again and again, God is seen afresh by Jesus as a God of surpassing goodness and of boundless, infinite mercy.

My friends, I believe that Christianity happens when men and women experience the reckless, raging confidence that comes from knowing, from experiencing the God of Jesus Christ. With this God there is no need to be wary, no need to be scrupulous, and no need to be afraid.

In his first letter, John writes, "In love there can be no fear, for fear is driven out by perfect love." Because to fear is to expect punishment. Anyone sitting here who is afraid of God, you don't know him. You do not know him. For as John puts it precisely, "You're imperfect in your understanding of the love who is God." But what about all these passages in the Hebrew, in the Christian scriptures that say, "Blessed are those who fear the Lord, and the Lord loves those who fear him in every generation." This is very

important. The biblical meaning of “fear of the Lord” is silent wonder, radical amazement, and affectionate awe at the infinite goodness of God. It has nothing to do with the fear of a slave being punished by his master. Again, the true biblical meaning of “fear of the Lord” is silent wonder, radical amazement, and affectionate awe at the infinite goodness of God.

Why does it take us so long to lay hold of this basic truth of our faith? One reason I am convinced of is this: the love of God in flesh in Jesus is radically different from our natural and human way of loving.

When I love as a man, I am drawn, I am attracted to certain persons and things. For example, I love the Jersey Shore and Clearwater Beach at sunset. I love Handel’s *Messiah*, hot fudge sundaes, my family in New Orleans. I am drawn; I am attracted to certain persons and things that I find congenial and appealing. So, when I love as a man, I love someone for what I find in him or her. But, unlike ourselves, the God and Father of Jesus loves men and women not for what he finds in them, but for what he finds in himself. It is not because men and women are good that he loves them, nor only good men and women that he loves. It’s because he is so unspeakably, unutterably, unimaginably good, that the God and Father of Jesus loves all men and women -- even sinners. He does not detect what is congenial, attractive and appealing, and then respond to it with his favor. He doesn’t respond to it at all! For the God of Jesus is a Source, he acts; he doesn’t react. He initiates love. He loves without motives. And because his love is creative, it originates good rather than rewarding it. That’s why St. Augustine can write those lyrical lines, “In loving me, you made me lovable.”

Why is Brennan Manning lovable in the eyes of God? Because on February 8th of 1956, in a shattering, life-changing experience, I committed my life to Jesus. Does God love me because ever since I was ordained a priest in 1963, I roamed the country and lately all over the world proclaiming the Good News of the gospel of grace? Does God love me because I tithe to the poor? Does he love me because back in New Orleans I work on skid row with alcoholics, addicts, and those who suffer with AIDS? Does God love me because I spend two hours every day in prayer? If I believe that stuff I’m a Pharisee! Then I feel I’m entitled to be comfortably close to Christ because of my good works. The gospel of grace says, “Brennan, you’re lovable for one reason only--because God loves you. Period.” Hard as this is for us to grasp because we neither give nor

receive love among ourselves in this fashion, yet we believe because of the life, death and resurrection of the carpenter Messiah, that his God, his Father, is more loving, forgiving and cherishing than Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob ever would have dreamed.

All these words of mine simply restate what is said in every page of the Christian scriptures -- that the God and Father of Jesus is gracious, that he loves us in a way that defies human comprehension and escapes human imitation. And that is why I can stand here this afternoon with theological certainty in the power of the Word and proclaim, "God loves you unconditionally, as you are and not as you should be, because nobody in this room is as they should be." Do you believe this?

Now I've been a Christian 40 years. Do you believe God loves you? I've been there quite a while and watch the way people live -- lives of anxiety, fear, shame, remorse, low self-esteem, self-condemnation. Oh, they believe God loves them in a vague, distant, abstract way but they'd be hard pressed to say right now that the essence of their Christian life is a love affair. And not just a simple love affair, but what G.K. Chesterton calls a "furious love affair" going on between Christ and themselves at this very moment. Do you honestly believe, with all the wrong turns you made in your past, all the mistakes, the detours, the moments of sin and selfishness, dishonesty and degraded love, that God has used them all to bring you to where you are right now? And the Word says, you are standing on holy ground. This moment, do you honestly believe that God loves *you* (not the person next to you)? Not that God just loves Billy Graham or Mother Teresa, or that God loves the church, the world, and in some vague way the whole human race, but that God loves *you*? Beyond worthiness and unworthiness, beyond fidelity and infidelity, that he loves you in the morning sun and the evening rain, without caution, regret, boundary, limitation -- that no matter what's gone down, he can't stop loving you?

If you don't trust that, you're living a life of illusion, superstition, cowardice. You are projecting onto Jesus your own hateful feelings toward yourself, assuming he feels about you, the way *you* feel about you. And thus you are worshipping a God of human manufacturing, a God who does not exist.

There is one God of the Christian vision, the God revealed and embodied in Jesus Christ, who at this moment walks directly to your seat, looks you straight in the eye and says, "I have a word for you. I know your whole life story. Right now I know your shallow faith, your feeble prayer life, your inconsistent discipleship. Nothing is hidden

from my eyes. And my word is this, 'I dare you to trust that I love you as you are and not as you should be, because you're never gonna be as you should be.' "

Biblically, to trust in the love of God means to accept with my head and my heart that God loves me in a creative, intimate, unique, reliable and tender way. Creative -- out of his love I came forth, through his love he sustains my existence. In fact, my next heartbeat is a loving gift from the Father's hand. His love is intimate. Do you have a skeleton in your closet of your past life, something you did that was so shameful, so selfish, so ugly that when you think about it your palms start to perspire and you say, "Please God, don't let anybody ever find out about that." The intimate love of God reaches into that dark place. You know, in the scriptures, reconciliation is not primarily making peace with somebody else. It's first of all making peace with that part of yourself where you could never find peace before. Such is the intimate love of God. His love is unique, meaning God loves me not as you think I am or as you think I am supposed to be, but as I really am.

I am a bundle of paradoxes and contradictions. I believe in God with all my heart, but when I see 300,000 people wiped away in a tsunami in southeast Asia, when I see a nine-year-old girl raped and murdered by a sex maniac, or a four-year-old boy slaughtered by a drunken driver, I wonder if God exists. I trust him and I get discouraged. I love and I hate. I feel dead, and I feel good. I feel guilty if I don't feel guilty. I'm wide open and I'm locked in. I'm trusting and suspicious. I'm honest and I still play games. Aristotle said I am a rational animal. I say that I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer. And that's the real Brennan. God's unique love reaches out to embrace me as I really am and not as I assume I am supposed to be. His love is reliable, meaning it's never let me down. I am sure of this.

If we have the opportunity today to share your life story and mine, we will find a striking similarity in at least one respect: both of our lives have been a celebration of God's faithfulness in good times and in bad. Ironically, it was April Fool's Day in 1975 when at 6:30 in the morning I woke up in the doorway on Commercial Blvd. in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I woke up in an alcoholic fog, sniffing vomit all over my sweater, staring down at my bare feet. I didn't know a wino had stolen my shoes during the night to buy a bottle of Thunderbird. I had been out on the street for about 18 months, a full year and a half, drunk every day drinking a minimum of a quart of vodka a day. And it

wasn't just that the good Father Brennan drank too much. I broke every one of the Ten Commandments six times Tuesday. Numerous adulteries, countless acts of fornication, theft to support my habit, character assassination of anybody who dared to criticize me, idolatry of that little plastic bottle of vodka. Slept on beaches 'til the cops caught me. Slept in doorways, slept under the bridge clutching that little, precious bottle of vodka. Out in the fields, a life of utter moral degradation, the fabric of my moral life completely unraveled. And that morning as I woke up in an alcoholic fog, I looked down the street and see a woman coming toward me, maybe 25 years old, blonde hair, an attractive lady. She had her four-year-old son in her hand. The boy broke loose from his mother's grip and ran over to the doorway and stared down at me. His mother came out quickly behind him, cupped her hand over his eyes and said, "Don't look at that filth. All that is, is pure filth." And she kicked me, breaking two of my ribs. And just about 30 years ago that filth was Brennan Manning.

And the God I've come to know by grace, the Jesus I've met in the grounds of my own self, loved me as much that morning in my state of disgrace as he does this afternoon in this state of grace, for his love is never, never, *never* based on our performance, never conditioned by our moods of elation or depression. It knows no shadow of alteration or change. The love of God in Christ Jesus is reliable. And his love is tender. Tenderness is what happens to you when you discover you're deeply and sincerely liked by somebody. If you communicate to me that you really like me, not just love me as a brother in Christ, but really like me (whether I never wrote a book or a sermon), but you like me for who I am, then you open up to me the possibility of liking myself, accepting myself, loving myself. The look of amiable regard in your eyes banishes my fears, my defense mechanisms like sarcasm, ridicule, name-dropping, subtle boasting about my victories in the vineyard. All that falls away if I sense that you like me. I will become more open, sincere, vulnerable and affectionate with you than I ever dreamed I'd be if you didn't like me. What happens is I grow tender.

I've got a friend in Detroit; his name is Ed Farrell. A remarkably gifted writer with a book called, *Prayer Is a Hunger*. I'd recommend it to anybody. Well, he decides to go take a two-week summer vacation to Ireland, and the reason is his favorite uncle is celebrating his 80th birthday. Well, on the morning of the great day, Ed and his uncle get up before dawn. They get dressed in the darkness and silence and they go for a walk

around the shores of the Lake Killarney. Just as the sun is about to rise, his uncle turns and stares straight at the rising sun. Well, Ed didn't know what to do. So he's standing beside his uncle, shoulder to shoulder, 20 full minutes and not a word exchanged. And then his uncle, his 80-year-old uncle, goes skipping down the road and he is beaming -- radiant and smiling from ear to ear. Ed Farrell catches up to him and says, "Uncle Seamus, you really look happy."

And in his thick brogue he says, "*I am lad.*"

"Want to tell me why?" says Ed.

"*Yes, you see,*" and the tears washed down the old man's face and beard, "*You see, the Father is very fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me.*"

If I ask you right now, if you think God likes you -- not loves you, because theologically God has to love you; God loves by necessity of his nature. Without the interior generation of love, God would cease to be God -- if I ask you if you really believe he likes you, and with gut level honesty you can reply, "Oh yes. The Father is very fond of me," there would come a relaxedness, a serenity, a compassionate attitude toward yourself in your brokenness, and you wouldn't have to buy my book *The Wisdom of Tenderness* because you are already living it. You'd have the awareness of being loved. By the way, I believe the real difference in the American church is not conservatives, liberals, fundamentalist, charismatics, Republicans, Democrats. The real difference is between the "aware" and the "unaware."

Picture a man walking through a mall on a Saturday afternoon. He stops in front of a men's clothing store. Ostensibly, he's checking out the merchandise in the window. But he isn't; he's got his eyes closed. And at that moment he's becoming aware by faith that he's being seen by Jesus with a gaze of infinite tenderness. The awareness of being loved enables us to love ourselves without excuses and without questioning. Self-acceptance is not pop psychology; it's not the power of positive thinking. It's a profound act of faith in the acceptance of Jesus Christ. That's why, for me, Paul Tillich's definition of faith is the most meaningful of all. He defines faith as "the courage to accept acceptance." It's the courage to accept Jesus through my whole life story; that despite every skeleton in my closet, he loves me and accepts me as I am. The awareness of being loved moves us beyond the oppressive demands of the ego self that is constantly saying, "I have *got* to get my act together." The interior dialog sounds something like this:

“Okay, that guy Manning is going to be speaking over there at that thing Alive is sponsoring. I’ve got to go, I’ve got to hear a word. I’ve got to get rid of all these lustful thoughts, all the judgmental attitudes toward other people. I’ve got to develop a better prayer life. I should go to Calcutta and spend a year with Mother Teresa’s missionaries. I know I should. I should. I really should.” That is the key operative word of the ego self, “I should. I should. I *should*.”

I’ve got this dear friend in New Orleans, a remarkable woman, Mary Michael O’Shaughnessy, with a double doctorate in scripture and psychology. You walk into her home, and she has a huge banner on her living room wall. You know what the words on it say? “Today I will not *should* on myself.” When her friends say to Mary Michael, you should take a vacation, or you should go back in the classroom, she says, “Don’t *should* on me.” The awareness of being loved empowers us to risk becoming our authentic self rather than a carbon copy of someone else.

My life is quite the story. For 21 years I tried desperately to become Brother Teresa. I lived around the world in grinding poverty and deep, paralyzing squalor. I lived for months in the city dump in Juarez, Mexico. It had garbage 30 feet high. Children who were four- or five-years-old worked the heaping piles of filth with men and women in their 80s. Side by side, they crawled through mounds of dead animals, and broken whiskey bottles to find something to eat, to find a piece of tin they could sell to the hawkers at the side of the road. I lived voluntarily as a prisoner in a jail in Friborg, Switzerland. Not as a chaplain, but as a prisoner whose identity was known only to the warden. I lived in a cell and worked in a factory six hours a day, trying as the founder of the community Charles de Foucauld said to “pleurer l’évangile avec votre vie.” That is, “To cry the gospel of your life.” I communicated through friendship, doing what you cannot do through preaching and teaching, to the people who don’t go to church anyways. I also lived on the streets of New York City with 12- and 13-year-old prostitutes, boys and girls, through the ministry of the Covenant House. See, I could never accept that God could love me as I am and not as I should be. But I thought if I became a replica of Mother Teresa or St. Francis of Assisi, God might love me then.

I’ve got this dear friend in New Orleans who used to be of the *Times Picayune*, and he’s very much like me. He’s capable of thinking these very lofty thoughts, but he’s also an airhead. Well, he goes on a three-day vacation over to Western Georgia, and he’s

driving down the road thinking all these grandiose thoughts when he runs out of gas. He gets out of his car, and he's walking down this red, clay road in a very remote part of Georgia. In the distance he spots an old, black evangelical preacher wearing a clerical collar coming toward him. So, Gene walks up to the preacher and says, "Reverend, do you have a word for me?" And the Reverend said, "Yes, I do. Be who you is, because if you ain't who you is, then you is who you ain't." Boy, what wisdom in that. "Be who you is, 'cause if you ain't who you is, then you is who you ain't." Don't cave in to peer pressure! Stop shouting with the crowd and being like everybody else. Dare to become that unique, singular expression of goodness, truth and beauty that God had in mind when he created you.

Do you see why the scriptures attach so much importance to knowing God? Healing our image of God heals our image of ourselves. Yes, healing our image of God heals our image of ourselves. Yahweh says to his prophet Hosea, "My people are fools; they know me not. It's love I desire, not sacrifice. He wants to be experienced, to be deeply and intimately known, and not just known about.

My friends, I hope it's not arrogant or presumptuous to say this but in my mind, what I am sharing this afternoon is the most important message God has given me in my 40-odd years of ministry -- to repudiate these false, distorted images of God. To my horror, we had a national televangelist insisting that God summoned a jihad on 9/11 that resulted in the death of 3,000 cops, firefighters and civilians because God was so angry at gays, lesbians, and People of the American Way. That's blasphemy! That is sheer blasphemy! That is a total denial of the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Get rid of all these caricatures of God that keep people living in the house of fear and not in the house of love! Why is it so important? Because it is the key to the central mystery of our faith, the Incarnation. Roughly 2,000 years ago, God threw aside the curtain of eternity, stepped into human history in the man Jesus, and now the awesome love of our invisible God has become both visible and audible in Jesus. And according to John in the prologue to his gospel, this was the purpose of Christ coming. "We have seen his glory, the glory of an only Son filled with enduring love."

The apostle Paul, who may have understood the mind of Christ better than anybody who has ever lived, writes to the Ephesians, "May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, and may love be the root and the foundation of your life. Then you will be

able with all the saints to grasp the breadth, the length, the height, the depth of Christ's love which is beyond all knowledge." Do you hear what Paul is saying? The love of Christ is beyond all knowledge! Stretch, man, stretch! Stretch, woman, stretch! Let go of your impoverished, circumscribed, finite, legalistic, traditional perceptions of God and open to, surrender to the God incarnate in Jesus until, as Paul says, you are "filled with the utter fullness of God."

My friends, that is the message of Jesus concerning God. You may want to quibble about a point here or there, but I am certain that theologians and biblical scholars agree that this is the essence of the Good News. In healing our image of God, Jesus frees us of fear of the Father and dislike of ourselves. Has Jesus set you free of fear of the Father and dislike of yourself? If not, you have still not totally accepted the sufficiency, the total sufficiency of his redeeming work. Jesus brings Good News. The old religious image of a vindictive, angry punitive God gives way to Jesus, who cherishes all people, even sinners. Jesus does not present a God who demands but who forgives, who does not oppress but raises up, who does not wound but heals, who does not condemn but forgives. Woe then to those who wound, condemn, oppress and punish in his name. It can only be said, they do not know the God of Jesus Christ.

Do you know Jesus intimately -- not something you read in a book or heard about him in a sermon? Is this your personal experience of Jesus? Here's one way you'll know if you know him: we all make our own images of God. But it's even truer that our images of God made us. Yes, our images of God make us, and we start to behave like a godly image.

A few years back, I drove from New Orleans to Lafayette, Cajun country, to meet with a very gifted woman to lead me through a healing of memories. She said, "Brennan, go back in your past life as far as you can. What's your first conscious memory?"

I replied, "My fourth birthday."

"Why do you remember that?" she asked.

I said, "It was the first time my mother ever let me have a birthday party."

"Why then?"

I said, "Well this is kind of weird, but my hometown newspaper in Brooklyn ran a contest for the best looking three-year old boy in the city. And when I was three, I was very chubby, my hair was a brilliant gold color, very curly, and I had big blue eyes.

Anyhow, my mother submitted my picture and I won the contest. I admit it was a lean year for three-year-olds in Brooklyn. And my mother gets \$10. Well, back in the 1930s that was big bucks. Or, as the kids say today, “she made bank, man, made bank.”

My mother gets the money and says I can have a birthday party, but there would be none of my little friends, no other children. I say this without a trace of bitterness or mean spirit, but I never knew a moment of love from my mother in my life. I have no memory of being held, hugged, embraced, or kissed by her. My mother was a registered nurse. When she came home, I was alone in the house. When she'd come in, I'd run and wrap my arms around her waist and she'd say, “Leave me alone, you're such a pest. You're such a nuisance. Go over in the corner and leave me alone!”

I remember one day my mother came home early. She was working two jobs: private duty nursing and also in the hospital. She came home early and she caught me in her bedroom. I had all her cased jewelry on the floor. I just loved the glitter of it. My mother walked in and screamed, “God is gonna get you and he's gonna get you good!”

My mother was born in Montreal, Canada. When she was three, her parents died in a flu epidemic that killed well over a thousand people in Montreal. My mother wound up in an orphanage for 10 years. I later visited the place. It was a savage, nasty place, one of the ugliest places I have ever visited. My mother never knew any love as a child, and was never able to give any as a parent.

Instead of inviting children to my birthday party, my mother invited three married couples who were friends of her and my dad. They came into the house. They haven't seen me since my infant baptism, and they're picking me up, hugging me and telling me what a wonderful little boy I am. I'm like a little sponge. I'm sucking up every bit of attention and affection I could get. And my mother says, “Stop that. It's disgusting!” So I stopped. We go to the dining room table, and my father sits at one head, and I'm allowed to sit at the other head. I've got on one of these two-cent birthday hats with the rubber band under the chin. A latecomer walks in, a man (his wife couldn't come). He walks over to my seat, picks me up, throws me into the air, rolls me around and kisses my forehead, my eyes, my cheek, my neck. And then he held me out in front of him and said, “You are the most remarkable little boy I have ever met in my life. You're very bright. You have a gentle spirit. Life is going to be very good to you.” Well, I really started to act out. I rubbed my nose against his, chewed on his hair and bit his ear. And my mother

screams, “Why do you insist on shaming me in front of my friends? Your birthday party’s over. Go to bed!” Well, this ghastly pall fell over the table because of the intensity of my mother’s anger.

As I went to my bedroom, my mother said, “Shut that door behind you.” So, I’m standing there, and there is no light in the room, only two lamps, and I am too short to reach the switch on the wall. Standing there in the darkness, I started to cry. I guess it was a combination of being rejected -- my father never said a word; we had a matriarchal household -- it was abandonment, it was the terrible shame of being humiliated in front of all these big people. My mother always told me to wear my pajamas when I went to bed, and for some reason the very idea of being even temporarily naked while I found my pajamas in the drawer was even more frightening. So I left my clothes on. I found the pajamas and pulled them on over my clothes. I crawled into bed, pulling the covers up over me, and thought, “My mother’s going to come in right now and demand that I give back my birthday hat.” I cannot exaggerate how much I treasured that birthday hat. I was convinced that the reason people were nice to me, and not only spoke to me but actually listened when I spoke to them, was all because I wore that little birthday hat. I thought if I could wear that every day the rest of my life, my life would be a picnic on a green lawn. So I took the birthday hat off, shoved it under my pillow, and I said to myself, “I’ll just lie to my mother and tell her I lost it and don’t know where it is.”

Well, during the healing of memories, here I am four years old, lying on the bed and I feel a hand on my shoulder. I look up and it’s my Heavenly Father. He said, “Hi. Where’s your birthday hat?”

I said, “Under the pillow.”

He said, “Sit up and put it on.” I sat up and put it on, and he reached out and he held me. And he said, “Now hear me well. No one will *ever* take your birthday hat from you, and no one will *ever* tear you from my hands.”

I felt this great wave of peace, but in a short time the guilt returned and I said, “Abba, I was going to lie -- not to just anybody; I was going to lie to my own mother -- tell her I lost my birthday hat.” You know what my Heavenly Father said to me at age four? The exact same words that his son, Jesus, spoke to me 37 years later at age 41, after being a broken-down drunk in the gutter for over a year and a half.

Friends had gotten me to Hazelden, the granddaddy of all rehab centers. I was so far advanced in chronic alcoholism that I was there for four months. The first month I was there, I was so covered with self-hatred and shame. The guilt was so intense that I actually thought of suicide. Memories of what I'd done drinking just ate me alive. The memory was the fifth week I was there. I went out and sat on a park bench in front of the main facility and I made this feeble attempt at prayer.

“Jesus, I am so sorry,” I said.

He said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

“I obviously don't love you. Not just once, but for a year and a half I've lived a life of selfishness, sin, of lust, of greed. You let me find the pearl of great price, and I swapped it for a cheap, plastic bottle of vodka.”

And I started to cry, and then I was crying hard.

Like a bell sounding deep from within, I heard a voice go, “Shhh, shhh.” And then Jesus said to me at age 41, the same words his Heavenly Father spoke to me when I was four years old, “Don't bother me with that stuff. Now come over and play.”

Is the Good News too good to be true? Is it just wishful thinking? Will you allow Jesus to come to you this moment as he really is, a Savior of unbearable forgiveness, of infinite patience with our failings, with a love that keeps no score of our wrongdoings? Would you gently close your eyes and join me in prayer?

In that lovely Quaker phrase, “center down” and tune out everybody else around you. Sink into the center of your grace being. Recall the words of Jesus in John 15:4, “Make your home in me as I make mine in you.” Now, don't think anything, don't intend anything, don't promise to perform anything. Just grow still and let yourself be loved. Like slipping into a tub of hot water, let the love of God seep in, saturate, permeate, and penetrate every part of you. It's one thing to understand intellectually he loves you, and quite another thing to realize it, to experience it, to be in conscious communion with it. Now hear this word from Paul, as if you were hearing it for the very first time in your life, “Nothing, absolutely nothing can come between us and the love of Christ.”

Even if we are troubled, worried, frightened, lonely, ashamed, depressed, or tilting toward despair. These are the trials through which we triumph by the power of him who loved us. I am certain of this. Neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing down the path, nothing down the road, not any power or height or depth, or any created

thing can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus Our Lord.

Now if this last word causes a movement or a stirring in your heart, accept this word not as encouragement from Brennan Manning, but as a healing, transforming, life-giving word from the risen Jesus: *“My friend, perhaps the most difficult thing for you to accept right now is your failure to have done with your life what you wanted to accomplish. This is not a cross that you wanted, or ever expected, a cross you find hardest to bear. Somewhere along the way you got the naïve idea that once you accepted me as your Lord and Savior, your relationship with me would be an unbroken, upward spiral toward holiness. Don’t you know that I am too realistic for that? I witnessed a few who claimed they didn’t know me, James who wanted power in return for service in the Kingdom, Philip who didn’t know he was supposed to see the Father in me, and scores of disciples who were convinced I was finished on Calvary. Yes, the gospels have many examples of men and women who started out well, and then faltered along the way. But on Easter night, I appeared to Peter. James is not recognized for his ambition, but for his sacrifice of his life for the Kingdom. Philip did see the Father in me when I pointed the way, and the disciples who despaired had enough courage to recognize me, the stranger at their side when I broke bread with them in the gathering darkness at the end of the road to Emmaus.*

“The point, my friend, is this: I expected more failure from you than you expected from yourself. Do you hear my word? I expected more failure from you than you expected from yourself. This moment, take your eyes off yourself, fix them on me, and let me be who I am. Savior.”

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