

Expulsion, Intimacy, Christian Narrative and Practice, and the Kingdom of Heaven at Hand

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Time-stamping cultural change is a dicey proposition. However, MTV ushered in the age of so-called “reality television” with its popular, multi-season series *The Real World*. Season three, *The Real World: San Francisco*, was the shot heard round the relational world for Generation X, when housemates voted to evict David “Puck” Rainey, a crass bike messenger lacking in personal hygiene, in order to retain the Cuban-born, HIV-positive AIDS educator, Pedro Zamora.¹ While the series followed the lives of young people living in fat pads in exciting cities, *The Real World* was far from reality. Yet, when the eviction of a housemate became not only an option, but also reality, the show seemed to settle back down toward the direction that mainstream American culture had been heading for some time. In that moment in time, in a house on Lombard Street in San Francisco, California, the guiding narrative became expulsion is the healthy option and reconciliation a seemingly weaker path forward.

Long before Music Television began broadcasting on cable TV in test-market towns, relational intimacy in American culture began its slow atrophy. Always an independent cohort, our gene pool in the United States of America was fostered by those willing to take risks in a wild world in order to gain greater personal or religious freedom. Perhaps it is that inclination toward independence that leads us accidentally and with the best of intentions down a path that values radical individualism over and above the challenges and depth of relational intimacy. From Alger’s Ragged Dick and Twain’s Huckleberry Finn to Wolfe’s “Me Generation,” we are now the full inheritors of the short up-sides and long down-sides of “self-help,” “my truth,” and “personal

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¹ “Rebel, Rebel,” *The Real World: San Francisco*, MTV, September 15, 1994.

relationship with Jesus.” As the culture has more eagerly embraced the individual over the unit—the couple, the family, the congregation, the neighborhood, the city—so, too, has our beloved church.

The cultural consequences of this slow atrophy exact a heavy toll on lives. As intimacy or connection declines, the capacity and willingness for human vulnerability recedes. As vulnerability recedes, the capacity for risk or the practice of courage atrophies. When courage is forgotten as a cultural virtue, creativity plummets. And since the Spirit is most readily experienced in our creative ventures, the current cultural climate impedes our ability to connect with the Divine, live an inspired life, and manifest inspiration in the lives of those around us.

The *deus ex machina* in our plot toward disintegration is a refocus toward the Christian story, paying particular attention to the human beings whose lives are lived out within the pages of Holy Scripture. A renewed focus on, attention to, and development of practices around the study of the Christian story are not just necessary, but essential in order for our more individualized faith practices to reembrace the Good News of deep relationship with God and the other. Further, the focus of this investigatory spiritual practice will not be a reclamation of objective and objectifying or dominant and dominating understandings of sacred truths that are so prevalent in modernism, but a new-ish way of living together that holds the bonds of human and divine relationship up as the highest goal where one (body) experiences “the kingdom of heaven at hand.” That said, while the story guides us back toward unification, *how* we read the story is of critical importance to the process.

We certainly do not abandon the good work of the academy. Scholarly approach to scripture only gives us greater insight into the power of the narrative. Perhaps we use these tools with a shift in our perspective back toward relational intimacy, if modernism gives rise to textual criticism in order to “get the text right.” Then, perhaps, in this shift in perspective in immersing ourselves in a relational approach to the text, for the pious scribes “Lord” is not only an addition, but also an indication of the intimate connection the scribe holds with Jesus. The understanding of the addition through this lens grants opportunity for us to consider our own relationship to Jesus and the subsequent terms of endearment we might attach to his name, like Teacher, Rabbi, or, even, Bro.

Further, because the narrative itself is dialogical our approach to its study must be also. I am not arguing that you and I cannot read our Bibles alone. Cultivation of a daily, personal habit of reading The Story is essential. But we cannot *always* read our Bibles alone. In this regard, the Word itself becomes sacrament. As brother and sister gather to reflect upon, struggle with, be encouraged by the narrative of scripture, the very practice of gathering around the Word builds intimacy not just with God but also with each other. The communion is made stronger by sharing the communion that is the Word.

Just a cursory reading of the Hebrew and Christian narrative leaves us an understanding of the overwhelming importance of relationship and the holy goal of life together lived in and among each other and God. Even as humanity is expelled from co-habitation with God in Eden, male and female are sent out *together* in order to work the land. The story narrates their first act outside of Eden in this way: “Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, ‘With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.’ Later she gave birth to his brother Abel” (Gen. 4:1–2, NIV). This is the essence of the most basic co-creative, relational living toward which scripture begins to point. The vision for living becomes far more rich and complex as the narrative develops over the millennia.

Some eight chapters later, God says to Abraham, “Leave your country, your family, and your father’s home for a land that I will show you. I’ll make you a great nation and bless you. . . . All the families of the Earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:1–3, *The Message*). God’s promise to Abraham is in essence, “I intend to make you a y’all.” The expectation is that Abraham can exercise both the vulnerability and courage in order to make the promise an active one. While the balance of the Hebrew scriptures continue to support the cultivation of relational intimacy between God and God’s people and between the people themselves, the scripture narrates authentically how incredibly fraught with challenge that work actually is. Kings rise and fall. Israel is unified and dispersed. Prophets, both minor and major, urge the individual back toward the collective.

We cannot read the New Testament without recognizing the same arc that bends toward relational intimacy. Tracking the theme through the narrated life of Jesus, we witness the anointing of the Spirit at baptism with the voice of God declaring, “You are my Son,

chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life” (Mark 1:11, *The Message*). Following a forty-day period of solitude in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus immediately begins gathering together a “family of choice,” beyond his “family of origin,” whom we have grown to call his disciples. The Gospel of Matthew tells a slightly different story of beatitudine connectedness—a vision for living where those who were formerly isolated and disconnected would no longer live in isolation but experience the full inclusion of relationship to God and God’s people through the technology of connection, which is blessing.

All four Gospels then become scripts recounting relational connection through healing, care, feeding, inspiration, pilgrimage, confrontation, disagreement, risk-taking, rest, challenge, and story telling. And finally, the scripture puts an end to the primacy of the individual in and through the Passion itself. “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42, KJV). Following the confusion of death and resurrection, Jesus greets his brother Thomas with characteristic empathy and intimacy, yet does not abandon the arc of the story. As Thomas declares his need to see for himself the miracle that has transpired, Jesus appears to the group and not only instructs Thomas to see for himself (“put your finger here”), but also reiterates trust by reminding him that those who believe without seeing, those who are able to trust, are more so blessed because of their reliance upon one another. It is upon this ground, the ground of trust and intimacy, what we have grown to call “faith,” that Jesus takes flight, and the Spirit descends in tongues of fire. Here, there is no longer a cacophony of voices but a single, unified song. In this song, this new-ish song, each voice is distinct. But, in the Pentecostal song each voice is heard *and* the sum shines more brightly beautiful than its individual parts.

If in our reading of scripture we search only for behavioral directive in order to achieve the best possible experiences and outcomes for our individual selves, we miss the “pearl of great price,” which is the truth that the kingdom of heaven is at hand when humanity is actively engaged in the mission of loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. And what a relief it is when scripture confirms for us what we already know so well from experience: living together is hard. Fathers abandon, mothers disappoint, sisters betray, brothers mock, children disobey, friends deceive, leaders violate trust, clergy shame. And, yet, when we immerse ourselves in the investigatory spiritual practice of reading the narrative of scripture, somehow, both

practically and mysteriously, these disappointments are redeemed and forgiven and life together is born again and again and again. We come to understand that, as scholar, author, and Episcopalian Brené Brown so eloquently says, “we are wired for connection,” “worthy of love and belonging,” and so are propelled toward a life of “whole-hearted living.”²

Episcopalians/Anglicans, though influenced by the culture we live in, seem to have some intuitive or unconscious sense that connection to God and each other or relational intimacy is the problem at hand. In the work of revising the text that unites us beyond the Bible, 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, the church elevates the ancient rituals of baptism and eucharist and includes reconciliation of the penitent. Long before the rise of reality television and during the up-tick of the Me Generation, the diocesan councils and conventions and General Conventions of the church were gathering together seeking to bring, at least, Episcopalians/Anglicans closer together. The work is similar to the work of the early councils of the church seeking doctrinal clarity in an effort toward greater unification of the church—one difference being that in the days of the majority of those early councils, Christendom was in full swing, and now we face a cultural context in the postmodern West where mainline Christianity is a minority subset of the culture struggling to lend its voice to the competing voices of cultural dialogue and influence.

By elevating baptism, the church sends a clear message to those who hear her say, “we want you,” “you are important,” “we are here for you, once and for all.” Belonging, being connected is of the utmost importance. We learn this, of course, from our practice of the study of scripture, but the practice gives rise to another. The narrative encourages us to develop supplemental practice, rites of acceptance, membership, inclusion, or connection. As we redouble our efforts to understand the relational arc of the narrative of scripture, we have a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of sacrament. Just as the story comes alive, again, for the church, so too do the rites of initiation. However, without a sense of connection to the story itself, the ritual grows flat.

² Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, Minn.: Hazelden Publishing, 2010), 1, 19, 125.

The same can be said for the eucharist. Without a sense of movement from altar to table, the disciple is left with an experience of God that can atrophy into a more individualistic piety. If I take my sacrifice to the altar of God in expiation of my own personal sin, my relationship with the Creator is two dimensional, at best. But, if I gather around the table in an effort to remember the Living God, who *is risen*, I am met with a multidimensional experience of God through not only the ritual, but also the experiences of others at the table and our shared experiences together. The narrative leads us into a deeper understanding of the eucharist. Not only do we exercise upon the commandment of Jesus, "Take, eat, this is my body, do this in remembrance of me," in receiving the Holy Eucharist, but we also have some sense of the deeper intentions of Jesus. The direction is not lock-step, repetitive practice for the sake of executing upon the commandment. The purpose is to exercise the technology of table. Table fellowship is elementary school for human relationship. The more we gather around the table, the more connected we become; the more we work out our difference, the more we inspire and challenge each other to live courageously and creatively. The fact that relational intimacy is born and nurtured around a table is not new to Jesus, nor is it new to the believer with a sense of the narrative and a cultivating practice of sharing in the eucharist.

As the relational arc of the narrative becomes more informative in our lives lived out and the historical practices of sacrament are viewed freshly through this lens, life for the Christian becomes fuller and deeper. An understanding of the story, supplemented by the rites of Christian practice, are then more easily translated to influence day-to-day living, leading toward micro and macro transformation of communities. Then, membership in a baptismal community naturally leads us toward a more connected and inclusive life. Eucharistic practice through the lens of relational connectedness extends the rite to include breakfast with children, lunch with work colleagues, dinner with friends, all the while "remembering him." Sacramental rites like reconciliation of the penitent, through this lens, help us remember the more basic practices of human relationship, like making an apology or reaching out to a loved one with whom we have become disconnected or lost touch.

Recreating communities of practice centered in a comprehensive or investigatory reading of Holy Scripture, particularly observing

the story as it narrates relationship and intimacy with God and the other, will begin to address some of the atrophy we have experienced in American culture, including the culture of American mainline Christianity. As we re-devote ourselves to the study of the Word as spiritual practice, our devotion to sacrament—baptism and eucharist or sacramental rites like reconciliation of the penitent—comes alive again in a fresh, new-ish way. Word refreshes sacrament. Sacramental practice resurrects the relational narrative and metanarrative of the scripture. There is no reason why the technology of Silicon Valley cannot support a similar goal of connectedness; however, without a guiding narrative of relational intimacy, new technology, just like old technology, can lead to further isolation. “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man”; “I will make you a y’all”; “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life”; “Those who were formerly thought to be cursed are now blessed”; “Not my will, but thine be done”: these words of connection and relationship offer the American Christian and Christians round the world a fresh expression of salvation and the small steps we need to take in order to experience the “kingdom of heaven at hand.”

