
Speaking of God Loving

by Mick Comstock

In this column, Mick Comstock continues a series of theological reflections exploring the intersection of biblical stories with stories of organizational life. In this issue, Mick invites us to explore in greater depth the theological meanings which might be contained in the provocative assertion that God loves organizations.

I want to continue meditating on Tom Henry's question: "Do you think God loves Specialized?", and on the shock of it. Since writing the previous reflection, I've learned that this question was first actually put to Tom, himself, by Dick Broholm. "Do you think God loves Landry?" is what he asked, and Tom was as stunned by the question as the executive at Specialized was, and as we were hearing about it. (Specialized makes great bicycles, and Landry's sells them).

I've begun to think that a part of the shock has to do with the way that the question of God loving a business enterprise threatens the violation of more than one of our dearly held pieties. Certainly it threatens the left-wing piety that closely associates the management of business enterprise with the work of the devil, and just as surely the right-wing piety that whether or not the workings of the market might themselves be divine, even God should not interfere with them. And what interferes with our workings, or our pieties, more than love?

There's a feeling of inappropriate behavior in the asking of the question, of something being said at the wrong time in the wrong place, of shouting fire! in a crowded theater or goddammit out loud in church. We've spoken in earlier articles about how we live our lives in different realms, each with its own values, and of how theology appears at the boundaries of those realms and often in the clashing of those

values, but here we feel violated the unspoken assumption that speaking of God loving belongs to some of those realms but not to others, and certainly not to the realm in which we do business! It's like the minister turning up in a brothel ostensibly for theological purposes. We suspect his motives.

It may be neither accidental nor perverse that this talk of loving has taken a turn toward eros, for we have been speaking of love at an inappropriate time in an inappropriate place, and what could be more erotic? Another way of saying the same thing is that part of the shock of speaking of God loving a business is that it threatens our usual ways of thinking about God loving and particularly how we usually protect our notions of God loving from desire, which in certain realms of our life is always in danger of turning to lust and in other realms to greed. Whatever we mean by God loving, we don't mean that kind of loving!

In their mainstreams, our theistic traditions have mostly meant agape when speaking of God loving, rarely eros. The two have often been contrasted with each other, sometimes to the point of being presented as opposites. Only the mystics have consistently spoken of God's loving as erotic. I myself, after living for a long time with the vicissitudes of my own love story, and with those of the love stories that have been shared with me as pastor, and with those of the biblical stories of the love affair between God and God's people, have come to understand agape, that highly ethical love shaping and shaped by justness, as a struggling achievement out of eros, rare for us, hopefully not so rare for God. The turning point from eros to agape, (for us and, if the stories speak truly, for God), is marked by our covenants, the promises we make to

each other, sometimes when we are still in the throes of desire.

We have been pursuing the question of how we can speak of God loving and have been surprised by the appearance of desire. But perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised at this because we began with a story, not a concept: Two men were talking together and one said to the other, "Do you think God loves Landry's?" That's the beginning of a story.

Concepts are the result of analysis, and can provide clear definitions and reasons. Conceptual ethical thinking can describe what is good, and give good reasons for doing good, but it can't persuade people to actually do what is good. Stories are about motives, or rather, stories motivate. They engage reason with desire. Concepts can lead a horse to water, but stories are an invitation and a persuasion to drink more deeply.

How do we go on from here? One of the resources that Christianity can contribute to this quest is its belief that to speak of Jesus is to speak of God. The name Emmanuel, "God with us", allows us to wonder whether how Jesus was with the people around him might be how God is with us. So how is it that the Gospel stories speak of Jesus loving, and which of the Gospel stories have to do with desire?

Here is one from the Gospel of John that speaks of desire by speaking of thirst for water:

Now when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again to

Galilee. He had to pass through Samar'ia.

So he came to a city of Samar'ia, called Sy'char, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

There came a woman of Samar'ia to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samar'ia?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?"

Jesus said to her, "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly." The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things."

Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

Just then his disciples came. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"

Wells were the surefire meeting places of the towns, because everybody needs water. They were also places for falling in love for the young whose task it was to keep their families well-supplied, (remember Rachel and Jacob whose well this was). They were also places of hope for the restless of all ages, because there you just might meet the one you have always waited for (think of Rebecca, Jacob's mother), especially in a border town on a major travel route. And if, out of despair, you'd decided to try to turn a profit from your restlessness and that of the weary traveler far from home, to sell what earlier on you'd gladly given, (maybe Jacob's son Judah's Tamar comes to mind), the well is where you'd set up shop.

Wells and springs also represent the depths of our souls and the emergence of spirit. (Remember Jacob's father Isaac, his spirit severed from its own

depths in the terrible contest between his father and his god, hanging around the well of his half-brother Ishmael.) So if you were a messiah wannabe, a salesman of salvation seeking souls, the well is where you'd show your wares, where you'd strut your stuff.

Knowing what we know about wells, and about truckstops and taverns, we have the ears to listen in on this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and hearing it well enough, perhaps to understand and even share the fussy nervousness of the disciples as they catch him at it. But, unlike them, we are bold enough to ask their unasked question, "Why is he speaking to this woman?" "What does he want?" And what does she want?

For, one thing is clear: they're not talking about water. We've heard this conversation before, maybe even participated in it. It is the classic double-entendre of mutual seduction between strangers. Because one of the strangers is Jesus, their banter returns us to the sense of shock at the prospect of God loving Landry or Specialized that propelled us into this meditation in the first place, and maybe helps us to understand it better.

Can you see in your mind's eye this woman looking back over her shoulder with a little smile as she asks why he, a Jew, asks her, a Samaritan, for water and can you hear her voice? Can you hear the joke about the traveling salesman trying to break into the conversation as Jesus responds with something like, "If you only knew, you'd be asking me for water, and if you ever drank some of my water you'd never need any more water"? Like I said, we've heard this conversation before, maybe even said these things with these tones. How embarrassing.

And how disillusioning! Is this how God so loves the world as John said just one chapter before? And it suddenly becomes clear that that's what's at stake in this story. God's love for the world, and thus for Landry, having just been

declared, what does it mean? What doesn't it mean? It is God, and how God loves, and not the woman, and how she loves, that's under judgment in this story.

It is only if and when we hear the desperate yearning under the practiced flirtatiousness in her voice as she says to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw," that we realize it was with her ears that we heard the salesman speaking, and, looking back, see the wry tiredness in her smile as she looks at him over her shoulder, and maybe hear her mutter under her breath, "One more dusty Israelite with high and mighty ways come to lord it over me like the bible says." As if she, who had heard it all before, had already heard him say what he was about to say, that "salvation comes from the Jews".

And underneath the cynicism of long experience, we might also hear the yearning that has driven her to the well over and over again: "Let it be him this time. Let it be the one I have always wanted in all my wanting, the one I have always loved in all my lovers." The thing the salesman try to touch in us, too.

Of course, we, with the omniscience of long experience in the faith, knew all along he was Christ, knew it was her soul he was after and not her body. So why do we not share her rising excitement as he let's her know he sees her life naked? Why does the messianic banter that now ensues not exult us as it so obviously exults her? Why does our sense of disillusionment persist when

we should be proud and happy she's seen the light? Is there something going on here that we're not in on? Are we into double entendre again, but this time without knowing the secret subtext?

For a lot of years I've struggled with this story with high school seniors at a small private day school in our town. Without fail the young women in the class become incensed at this point: for, though they for the most part don't share the Samaritan woman's long experience, have not yet been to the well very many times, they do feel her vulnerability and her yearning, and they

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become fiercely protective of her. They are proud when she goes head to head with Jesus in the sexual bantering, and they feel betrayed when it seems she succumbs so easily to his messianic razzle-dazzle. But they do not abandon her, even when it looks like she's abandoned herself. They are passionately for her, and their anger is directed at Jesus. "Why," they rage, "is it any better that he should have seduced her for religion than if he had seduced her for sex? Either way it's for him and not for her."

And there it is! Suddenly we have a criterion. We know what must be if how Jesus is with the Samaritan woman could truly be spoken of as loving. He must be as passionately and faithfully for her and her well-being as these young women are.

And so we also know that whatever else it might mean to say the God loves Landry it must mean that God is passionately and faithfully for Landry's well-being, and that doesn't reduce the shock much, because it sounds so uncritical. But armed with this criterion we may be prepared to go back into the story of the loving of the woman at the well one more time, scrutinize her behavior through the eyes of one who loves her fiercely, and then to return to the story of the loving of Landry better able to understand what it might mean.

Of course it is her love life that draws our attention. When Jesus makes it clear he sees her as she is, knows the truth of her, she seems almost elated rather than being ashamed as we might expect. This rising excitement is the only indication in the story about how it is for her to be loved by him. And she responds in kind, by naming the part of his truth that means the most for her. He is a prophet, one who sees and speaks truly. She has been known truly and her truth has been spoken in love.

But what is her truth? That she is one whose thirst has driven her to the well over and over again and yet she is still thirsty. Is her unquenchable thirst seen through the eyes of this one who loves her as hopelessly immoral? Does it make her, in his eyes, a candidate for psychiatric care? Or is it she that is seen through his eyes, and seen as one who up to now has not known what it was she really thirsted for? It is not her wanting that is under judgment, here, but that she has laid upon her previous and present lovers, as we do to our own, the burden of fulfilling a desire that went far beyond anything that they could ever hope to satisfy.

With her desire thus recognized and affirmed, it is she, not Jesus, who so abruptly changes the subject to religion, or rather, who so suddenly realizes what the subject has actually been all along, throughout all those years of going back to the well. Jesus, loving her, quickly and deftly lifts the conversation up and away from the particulars of religiosity,

whether Samaritan or Jewish, or earliest Christian for that matter, where she might have gotten as lost as she had been in her relationships with her men, to the realm of spirit where all true worshippers worship truly. By the time he utters those outrageous words, “I am he”, she already knows, and he knows she knows, it is messiah she loves; in fact it is messiah she has always wanted, always loved in all her lovers. For who is messiah after all but the one we’ve always really desired, the one we’ve always waited for?

The story of the woman at the well re-establishes the connection between desire and spirit, which is so easily lost to us especially when we’re trying to be ethical. When desire twists to lust in our love-making or to greed in our money-making and we begin to count the cost we are rightly inspired to think ethically, but our first thoughts are of sacrifice, of giving something up, and desire is usually the first thing to go. Then we grieve as our more proper

love- or money-making becomes spiritless.

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This thought returns us to the sense of shock with which we began, and focuses the suspiciousness that was such a strong constituent of it. For now we must hear the TV preacher crying, “God wants you to be rich and wants you to give a lot of money to my ministry because God wants me to be rich, too!” and, hearing this, hearing spirit once

more being distorted by greed. That’s truly the risk of this line of thought.

But “well-being” is richer than “rich”. It has critical as well as descriptive possibilities. Reflection on its many meanings, and on its power to integrate the many bottom-lines that make up our lives is what ethical thinking is about. In its theological dimension, this reflection should lead us from this meditation on desire to consideration of the covenants in which desire often entangles us. ■

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