MEMORIES OF GOD
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON A LIFE

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Memories of God

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON A LIFE

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looking at God through the eyes of the culture, and so at myself as a woman in the image of God as well.

> "God created humankind in God's image,
> in the image of God God created them;
> male and female God created them."

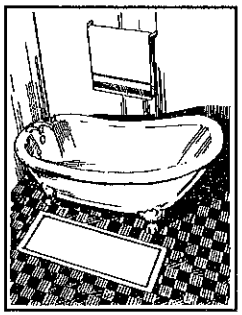
Thanks be to God for the gift that illumined this text plainly to me.

* *

My mother survived her surgery, though I was not convinced that she would recover for a very long time. In November, on my birthday, two months after her operation, I went out and bought myself a flute. In January, I once again began lessons. And in the late spring, I received a box in the mail. She had made me a flowered dress for Easter just like hers. I was proud to wear it, and I looked beautiful.

◊ FOUR

Out of the Green-Tiled Bathroom: Crucifixion



When the children were still in elementary school, three years after I married Richard and four years after I began to teach church history in the seminary, as I was walking between the living room and dining room one day I discovered that I had lost the meaning of the crucifixion. I don't mean that I didn't know what Christians said about the cross. As a historian and teacher of Christian thought, I had a lot more information than most people have, and I knew that. I don't mean that I had lost my faith. It was much stranger than that, something more like what I would imagine a stroke victim experiences when she looks at a familiar object like a book or a dinner plate in an ordinary setting, and can't understand

what she is seeing. On that day I looked at the cross, and it made no sense. All at once the crucifixion had become as opaque to my heart as the water of a muddy pond in a forgotten field.

This was a frightening experience. "What is happening to me?" I wondered to myself. "How can I not know what the crucifixion is about when I teach it every day? Have I forgotten what it means, or have I somehow lost its meaning by taking it for granted?" I remembered my grandfather Joe who had begun to become senile in his fifties. "Perhaps," I thought, "this is happening to me, too." I did not know what to do.

At that time I had no regular practice of prayer, but I prayed in my fear, anyway, "Please, God, tell me again, what is the reason for the crucifixion?" Over the following week my confusion and bafflement only grew as I continued to pray.

Then, on the eighth night I had a terrifying dream. I dreamed I was with Richard in my great-aunt Blacky's farmhouse on the hill outside Morganfield, Kentucky. It was the middle of a good-smelling early summer day, with the insects humming and the hassock fan whirring on the front porch. Sunlight poured through the kitchen into the back hall where I stood, but I was in darkness. I was sobbing and wringing my hands outside her green-tiled bathroom. In the bathroom Richard was kneeling in the bathtub, his neck held over the drain by

a powerful looking, dark-haired man with a huge knife I knew had come to kill me. "Don't hurt her," Richard was saying. "Take me; just don't hurt her; take me."

In my dream I was dying with grief. I wanted to shout, "No, no; I'm here, leave Richard alone," but I couldn't make any sound. As I watched in horror, the killer slit Richard's throat and red blood flowed all over the green tiles.

Then the dream was over, and I began to rise out of sleep, shivering, sobbing, and covered with sweat. I became aware that Richard was shaking me, petting me, and calling me by name. At once I remembered my prayer, shuddering with horror. In the very same instant the words formed in my mind, "this is what you've always thought the crucifixion is about, but this is not it," and I knew that both were true.

I could not imagine what had happened to me. How could I have not known that I had believed such terrible things? I had liked to think of myself as a fairly simple, straightforward person. Even so, I was always aware that I was not so simple. I may have always held my chosen, adult convictions firmly and fiercely. Still, I knew perfectly well that a good bit of my adolescent and adult life had been governed, not by what I *wanted* to think, but rather by a whole world of childhood and even adult experiences that I often could no longer even remember. These experiences had led my heart to believe

the exact opposite of my chosen convictions. Being human, therefore, I had spent a lot of my life full of vague guilt and a sense that whatever I did, it was always wrong—my own version of Paul's paralyzing troubles—"The good that I would do I do not; that which I hate I do."

The only way I knew then and still know out of this trap is to try to discover what my heart believes so that I can argue with it and seek its healing. Dreams and prayer are unlike each other in many ways, but one great gift they both bring is an ability to strip away the whole accretion of our conscious, chosen thought. Then, if we are brave and if we wish it, we are able to look into our own hearts and find, not what we think we believe, but what we really and truly do believe about life, about ourselves, and God. My dream had done this for me. Even in those first waking moments I could see that my nightmare had presented me with an exaggerated and extended image of what I actually had believed in my heart about the crucifixion until that night.

But what on earth had I believed? In spite of myself, since childhood I had always known that I had thought of the work of Christ in terms of sacrifice for sin, but had this meant to me that the crucifixion of Jesus was like the terrible murder in my place of Richard in Aunt Blacky's green bathroom? Did I believe my sin was the cause of Jesus' murder, and if so, what did I think my sin was? Did I believe that, all things being equal, God

would have preferred that I be murdered instead? Who was Jesus in all this, and how did he participate? Who did I think it was who had chosen that murder as a remedy for sin? Was it Jesus? Was it God or the devil, or were they the same person? What awful thing was my dream telling me I had been thinking about God?

As embarrassing and as painful as it was, I knew I had no option but to untangle it piece by piece, and over the next year I began the work of doing just this. The following day I began on the long process of recovering and understanding my memories.

I began with the first time I ever heard the words *sin, Jesus,* and *sacrifice* spoken together. It was during a revival at Pond Fork Baptist Church, which I attended every summer when we would visit my relatives in Union County, Kentucky. As I have said already, Pond Fork had always been the church of the oldest generation of my mother's family. Set in the middle of the corn fields out by the Big Ditch between my great-grandparents' farm and my Uncle Bob's, it was a little church, an old-fashioned, white frame building with a gallery and a potbellied stove.

In the days of my childhood, the summer revival was the high point of the church year, and it was not only a liturgical event. It was an occasion out of the ordinary, like the Union County fair or the Fourth of July picnics. Like the picnics and the carnivals at the fair, there was

something about revivals that was dangerous, something that threatened what my polite family everywhere else regarded as socially acceptable. During revival meetings other families' grown-ups sometimes sobbed and shouted and said things I knew they shouldn't in the presence of children. The pushing-the-limits kind of danger at a revival had the same questionable quality to it as the jokes my uncles sometimes told at our enormous family dinners. Though I never understood them, I could tell that they were important because they made my aunts who were waiting on the table angry and blushing.

The goal of a revival was to create or revive in everybody the threefold conviction that each of us was so rotten to the core that we deserved to die and roast in hell forever; that God was enraged enough at us to kill us; and finally, that, in spite of everything, God loved us enough to rescue us by sending his son as a sacrifice to die in our place. As for how Jesus himself saw all this, it was just fine with him. To die for sin in perfect obedience to the will of the Father was the only reason he had been born in the first place.

Not just the preaching but the whole service was aimed at convicting us of the truth of all this. Before Brother Smith ever began his message of sin, hell, and love, we were already well prepared. To the accompaniment of the choppy gospel piano, we had sung to each

other in enthusiastic nasal voices that "we were sinking deep in sin," but also that there is

> a fountain, filled with blood,
> drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
> and sinners plunged beneath that flood
> lose all their guilty stains.

"There is none righteous, no, not one," the deacon would have read from his worn, red-letter King James Bible, its spine crumbling in his hands.

Even John Bundy, my pear-shaped great-uncle who still lived at home with my great-grandparents, would have had a part in reminding us of what we couldn't forget. Having changed out of his striped blue overalls and smelly work boots, he would be dressed in a pair of round-toed black shoes and shiny gray pants barely held onto his belly by a slippery looking belt. "Oh, Lord," he would pray, bowing his head and scrunching up his creased and sweating brown face, "you *know* we are all sinners who *deserve* to *die,* but you *love* us and you sent *Jesus,* your *son,* to die a *terrible* death for us instead."

As a child I loved to go to revivals with my great-aunts, at the same time that the revivals terrified me. The talk about sin and rottenness and the rage of God the Father made sense. I was always aware there was something fatally wrong with me. As the smallest child I had figured out that there must be very few acceptable

people in the world. In Sturgis a large portion of family conversation was spent deploring the existence of people who weren't part of our family—particularly, it seemed to me, women who didn't know "how to do," who didn't work till they dropped, or have widely admired children. "The only reason this family ever accepted me," Uncle Quentin's wife, Aunt Hilda, once told me, "is because somebody figured out I was a distant cousin." At home in New York my daddy ridiculed everybody I knew: women first, but also police, schoolteachers, Nash owners, Brooklynites, Yankees fans, Catholics, Jews, Protestants, his mother and sister, do-gooders, my friends, and my mother's friends.

All this ridicule of people I wanted to be allowed to like and respect told me that if none of these other people could measure up as human beings, I could never measure up either. If I already irritated my earthly father daily, I could certainly never meet the far stricter standards of my heavenly Father. I was bad through and through. I got in trouble in school for not finishing my work. I was a girl. I lied. I was always angry with my parents, and the very word *obey* made me feel sullen and resentful. I wanted to read instead of helping Mama. I imagined kissing Larry from across the apartment complex. I wouldn't hold still and stand on both feet when Mama hemmed my skirts, I had nightmares, I was afraid of everything, and I was unhappy.

Under the circumstances, the language of sin gave me a way to explain myself to myself. It told me what was wrong with me, why I felt as though I stood perpetually under the judgment of the whole universe. As a child, the meaning of "sin" was relatively straightforward. My very being was so sinful that God himself was enraged.

Revival talk about the sacrifice of Jesus was tougher to understand. *Sacrifice,* unlike *sin,* was a difficult-to-live-with, many-layered word I heard outside of church as well as inside. As a nine-year-old, I would have been hard pressed to say precisely what it meant if I had been asked its range of meanings, but I would have recognized them all if someone could have defined them for me. Sacrifice, after all, was the stuff of my life, of all of our lives.

In the aftermath of the Great Depression and the Second World War, to the child I was, the most obvious meaning of sacrifice had nothing to do with shed blood. It was about "doing without." It meant that, rather than spending my allowance for what I wanted in the present, I should save my money for some indefinite future. "Sacrificing" was doing without what you wanted just because it was good to do without what you wanted. Children should "learn to sacrifice." Modern children "had too much," my father proclaimed every Christmas Eve as I wondered guiltily about the next day's presents. Though no one had ever said so in so many words, it

was clear to me that the ultimate goal of "learning to sacrifice" was to learn not to want anything at all.

Church talk about God's demand for sacrifice complemented this primary meaning in a horrible sort of way, as the attempted sacrifice of Isaac illustrated. The story went like this. A long time ago there was an old man named Abraham who didn't have any children. One day, God told Abraham that he was going to send his wife, Sarah, a little boy. When Isaac, the son, was born, Abraham loved him more than anything in the world. God didn't like this, so one day God decided to test Abraham. "Abraham," God said to him, "I don't want you to love anybody or anything as much as me. If you love me, you will have to prove it to me by sacrificing Isaac on the mountain I will show you. I don't mean that I want you to dedicate him to me. I want you to kill him. Have you got that?" "Yes, Lord," Abraham said; and to prove how much he loved God, when he and Isaac went up the mountain, he even made Isaac carry the knife. In the end, God rescued Isaac, but the point had been made: God had demanded Isaac as a sacrifice just because Abraham had wanted him so much, and because Abraham was good, he had handed Isaac right over.

Sacrifice, therefore, in its most basic secular and sacred context, meant giving up what you most wanted and loved because it was bad to want anything a lot. In this sense, everybody was supposed to sacrifice. But over

and above this, "sacrifice" also had a specialized, particular meaning that applied to women in family life. Real women were supposed to suffer on behalf of their husbands and children, and this suffering was called "sacrifice." If the mother was exhausted with a new baby and the baby cried in the night, it was mama who got up because daddy needed his sleep. If there were two pieces of chicken and three family members, mother smilingly went hungry. If there were three silver forks and one battered, black fork, that was the one mother took. In the forties and fifties this behavior was expected of all mothers, not just mine. A woman's sacrifices proved to her husband and children that she loved them, and to the world that she was a good woman. They were the foundation of her moral authority in her family; without them she could never hope to win the guilty gratitude of her children and her husband.

Because everyone saw these sacrifices as a necessary part of being wife and mother, they were not necessarily a free expression of love. I was nine years old when I first learned that a good, sacrificing woman was expected to give up more than simply her desires, her needs, or even her lifeblood. A sacrificing woman was to be "selfless," and this selflessness included bearing the consequences of the sins of her husband and children. I first began to realize this, I remember, one late afternoon when my mother was in the early stages of pregnancy with my brother Wesley.

On that late, bleak winter day all the curlered mothers of Oakland Gardens were cooking supper and vacuuming for the homecoming of the fathers. A woman whose name I can't recall came from across the courtyard to summon my mother to the stoop in front of the apartment. Several other mothers were already huddled there, shivering with their hands in their pockets or their arms crossed on their chests.

In the confusion, I was able to sneak down the stairs behind my mother and hide within earshot.

"What is it?" somebody in a blue housedress asked. "What's going on?"

"It's Carol," someone in a maroon chenille bathrobe answered. The sound of her voice told me something had happened.

Carol was Mrs. McInerny. She, her husband, and her two children lived in a second-floor apartment just like ours around the keyhole from our part of the complex. I had been to their apartment for coffee cake after school with my mama and some other mothers not very long ago. I liked Mrs. McInerny. She had been nice to me. She had sat down on the floor with me and asked me questions about myself as though she had liked me. To my mind, she was an exotic woman of substance, a nurse, who had later given her baby a shot in her own kitchen right there in front of me. Nevertheless, I had also noticed her worn brown sweater covered with nits

and pulls, her pale skin and wispy hair, and the dirty mustard furniture, the drab beige rug, and the drawn shades.

"What!" "What is it?" "What, what!" the mothers cried.

The nameless woman spoke. "You won't believe it. I was just talking to Betty, her downstairs neighbor. You know what Betty said? She said that when Jimmy came home from Scouts yesterday, he walked into the bedroom and found his mother hanging from the ceiling with a note to Bob pinned to her dress. Can you imagine!"

I stopped breathing. What had happened to Mrs. McInerny? My chest hurt and my mouth went dry in excruciating sympathy. I imagined I could hear her crying, and feel her fear and loneliness, her desperation and despair during her last few minutes of her life as she wrote her note and fastened it to her hem.

Then the angry voices of the adult conversation faded back in. " . . . Selfish! That's what she was, just selfish!" the women's voices went on. "She was only thinking about herself! We all know that man was running around on her, but that's what men do. What was wrong with her, anyway? She should have been willing to sacrifice!"

Now I was truly paralyzed with horror. Mrs. McInerny was dead, and not one grown-up said she was sorry

or wondered out loud about what she had felt. Were those women mostly worried about the poor little boy who had found his mother? I don't know, but at the time it seemed to me that the mothers were angry because by dying Mrs. McInerny had refused to be a real woman.

But, apart from love of her children, why should Mrs. McInerny have accepted this burden of blame and punishment? This gets us to the other side of what I as a child understood the reason for such an expectation of self-sacrifice to be. As a little girl, I do not recall being told much about the original sin of Eve, but I do remember connecting the need for women's sacrifices with their culpable inferiority to men. It seemed to me that those wives and mothers must have expected Mrs. McInerny to bear the brunt of her husband's infidelity simply because she was a woman in the first place. Women suffered what men did not have to suffer because they deserved to suffer for being only women. This was the obvious explanation of why women had to do what their husbands told them. It was also why, unlike my brothers, when I became a grown-up I could never be president. Women could never become artists or writers or business people or scientists or intellectuals or even ministers. It wasn't that we weren't allowed to do these things so much as we weren't able, and so for this sin of inability we paid the price: we sacrificed ourselves.

As complicated as the general and specialized meanings of "sacrifice" were, trying to understand the sacrifice of Jesus in the context of these meanings was hard work. To begin, though I don't remember consciously pondering it, I must have thought in those very early years that if sacrifice is the law of human life, it must be the divine law as well. If it is good for human beings to give up what they want simply because they want it, it must be good for God, too. "God so loved the world that he sent his only son. . . ." Abraham was willing to kill his son, and even God the Father, in the same spirit, must have sent his own son for the express purpose of being killed as well.

At the same time, Pond Fork Baptist Church had made it very clear to me that God's giving up Jesus was not quite in the same category as a mother getting up in the night with the baby so that the daddy could sleep. Sin was the fundamental cause of all human suffering, and Jesus bore the brunt of it just as surely as wives were supposed to bear the brunt of their husband's and children's sins. My sin—my lying, my being unhappy, my disobedience, my femaleness—all these were the actual cause of Jesus' sacrifice.

But past this point, how did it all hang together? Sometimes what I heard at church suggested that the Father's sacrifice of Jesus had something to do with God's need to provide the death of his only son to pay off some unspeakable debt I had run up without intend-

ing it. I wasn't actually very clear about the nature of this debt. I knew, however, that God had made Jesus come to earth for the express purpose of paying it, though I wasn't sure for what or to whom it was to be paid. Sometimes it was God's "justice" that demanded it; sometimes it was the devil. I couldn't tell the difference; I was terrified of the unlimited anger and power of God and the devil, both. One of my most frightening childhood dreams featured me strapped into a dentist's chair in a darkened church basement, my eyes fixed feverishly on a neon cross on the wall while the devil danced around me, dental instruments in hand.

A simpler, logically vague, but emotionally convincing explanation left out the debt and the devil altogether and revolved instead around the ever-present anger of God the Father. My human father, God knew, loved me very much but he was also angered easily by his daughter's sins, particularly the sin of disobedience, for which there were never an escape from punishment. The worst part of punishment was never the spanking, but my father's insistence that I acknowledge my absolute wrongness and his absolute rightness. Stubborn and easily humiliated child that I was, this felt to me like death.

Everything I had heard in church told me that my heavenly Father was a parent even stricter than mine. As a parent, he loved us very much, but in the matter of his power and authority, his anger was more dangerously volatile than that of my human father. Although God loved us, by our sin we had enraged God so much that punishment wasn't enough. Somebody had to die for it. Jesus was that somebody.

But did God in this sense kill Jesus, or did Jesus choose it? Whatever else I believed as a nine-year-old about the crucifixion, I didn't believe that Jesus was simply killed against his will. Obedient to the Father even unto death, Jesus had chosen his death in exactly the same ways and for the same three reasons women sacrificed themselves for their husbands and children. First, he had to prove to us that he loved us by pouring over us fountains of his blood. Second, he had to show us he was so good that he had wanted nothing for himself, not even his own life. Third, he accepted it as his role in life to bear the brunt of what we had done wrong. And there was a fourth reason as well. Jesus wanted us to know without a shadow of doubt that all Christians, but especially Christian women, were to sacrifice themselves exactly like him.

There was a small problem in this understanding of the work of Christ. Unlike women, the obligation on Jesus to sacrifice himself did not follow upon his being female. After all, as a human being, Jesus was perfect, free of sin, and male. This difficulty was removed for me at the time, however, by the way I understood Jesus' subordinate place with respect to God the Father. The Father was to Jesus as husband was to wife.

This was the way in which the inner logic of the crucifixion as it was governed by the notion of sin, sacrifice, and love attracted, terrified, and repelled the nine-year-old me. After my parents were divorced when I was eleven and a half, my mother was left with very few resources, and the care of my little brothers and me. It was only as I lived with and loved my mother in the years that followed that I came to experience another and far more painful dimension to the meaning of the crucifixion as I understood it then and its inner relationship to love, sin, and sacrifice.

The years of my adolescence were difficult years for us all, but they were made unbearable to me by my awareness of the special hardship of my mother's life. Not only did she wrestle daily with her own devouring grief and anger; as a proud woman for whom the care of her family had always been primary, she had to suffer the fear and judgmentalism of the fifties toward divorced women. But this was only part of it. Without an education and no job experience since her marriage thirteen years earlier, she was also left at the mercy of a world that wouldn't pay her a living wage for her "women's work" as a secretary. Later, when I turned fifteen and was allowed to work at Grant's, I learned that, as hard as Mama's life was, it was not nearly as hard as the lives of many other women with children or elderly parents to support on their solitary salaries. My work at Grant's was the end of my belief that there was

something natural and right about the sacrifices women bore in their families and in the larger society as well.

My brother Fred learned the same lesson directly from my mother when he was about sixteen and she had told him to get out of bed and do some yard work.

"I can't get up and mow the grass for you," he had answered, one summer Saturday morning about eleven o'clock. "I'm too tired."

"How do you think I feel?" my irritated mother replied.

"That's different," said Fred, with all the complacency a teen-aged male of the fifties could muster. "You're a mother. You're tough. You can take it."

"Get out there and mow," she answered, yanking him out of bed in his undershorts, "and don't you dare say anything like that again!"

The fact was that, however much worse off many women were, what I knew was that Mother's life was hard in a way it never would have been if she had not had us children. It was because of us that she had to work so hard. It was our laundry she wore herself out doing, our bills she had to pay. It was our meals she stood at the stove and cooked in the hot summer evenings when she got home from work. It was to pay for my flute lessons that she did without things herself. It was because of us she had almost no time or energy

for friends. In sum, it was for our well-being alone that she had sacrificed and would continue to sacrifice everything of her own wants and needs.

In the face of all my mother's sacrifices I was full only of an overwhelming sense of unworthiness and obligation I could never meet. I could not bear to feel my mother's suffering. I was the cause of her hurt. I ought to be able to make it up to her by being who she wanted me to be, but I couldn't. I still hadn't learned not to want things, and now, when we had no money, it really mattered. My grades were low; I was lazy; I was shy; I never wrote my thank-you notes; I was even more afraid of my father than I had been as a child, even less like the people my parents and my parents' families seemed to admire. Worst of all my sins, I was more unhappy than ever.

I knew I was unworthy of my mother's sacrifices, and the shame and guilt that I carried because of what she was suffering on behalf of my sorry self left me helpless. The whole situation filled me day and night with sullen rage. I did not want to be sacrificed for; I did not want my life in the place of my mother's. I did not want my mother's loneliness and anxiety and exhaustion. And most of all I did not want the whole burden of the pressure to be worthy of all my mother's love and pain.

My poor mother! Any attempts to tell Mama how I felt always ended up in the same place. I could never

explain myself in a way that made sense to her. "I can't understand how you feel," she would say, baffled and beside herself with frustration over unjust accusations she couldn't even understand. "You are just fine the way you are. I don't care about your grades. You children are all I've got! Just grow up to be good people. All I want is for you to be happy." The only thing she wanted I could not give her. All those sacrifices for nothing.

How could I ever get out from under the burden of all this sacrifice and love and unworthiness? Recognizing in my life the familiar themes of Pond Fork's summer revivals, over the spring and summer of my freshman year of high school I made friends with two kind-hearted evangelical fellow students. Though neither of them believed in Brother Smith's angry and vengeful God, they had no idea how to understand my unhappiness except in the familiar terms of sin and repentance.

"I feel so bad," I told my friends, tears running down my cheeks, sitting on a gray rock at Good News Camp.

" 'There is none righteous, no not one,' " Douglas answered me, and I marked it in on the India paper of my beautiful, thin red Bible he had given me.

"You feel bad because you are a sinner," Jane Anne said, gently. I knew this was true.

"God cannot tolerate sin, but God loves you and sent Jesus to die for your sins." When they added, "Repent and believe the Good News that God loves you enough

for Christ to die for you and accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior," I was in trouble. The trouble wasn't in the repenting part. I had been repenting of everything I was with my whole heart as long as I could remember; now, I was only stepping up my efforts.

The trouble was in the business about sacrifice. My mother was sacrificing for me every day. She hadn't literally died, and I couldn't stand it. Now I was being told that because of my sin, Jesus had actually gone through with it and died. How on earth could this be good news? I could never survive that cosmic burden of guilt and gratitude and obligation. No matter how many prayer meetings I went to, no matter how much I repented or how many times I asked Jesus to come into my life as my personal Lord and Savior, it never worked; I just couldn't believe.

It was soon after this failed experiment that I fell in love with my high school boyfriend and his Unitarian family. During the rest of my high school years in the shadow of their rational humanism I had some superficial relief from the burden of Jesus' sacrifice. Still, the facts of sin, love, and sacrifice were not so easy to escape as all that.

The end of my childhood coincided with my marriage at eighteen to another boy whom I wanted to marry, I think now, not just because he reminded me of my

father, but because at some dim level he also seemed to offer me a way out from under the burden of my unworthiness of my mother's love and sacrifices. He believed entirely in what I had learned as a child about the importance of sacrifice for women. Wives sacrifice; husbands receive. If I could prove my love to him by the sacrifices I could make; if I could become the one sacrificing rather than the one sacrificed for, I would no longer be unworthy. I would be an adult woman. I would be free. My sacrifices would quench my burning anger and my raging guilt.

Of course, none of it worked out as I had thought it should, and the time of that marriage was very hard. At the same time much good took place in those years. I finished college and I spent two years in seminary. I did my graduate work at Oxford University in England, in Hebrew, then in early church history. It was during this time in the Bodleian Library that I first met the generous and gentle God of the early monks through the sixth-century monophysite bishop, Philoxenus of Mabbug.

It was also then in the great library of Oxford that I first read more widely in the ancient theology of early Eastern Christian writers such as Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa, and from them my heart began to receive hints of a new way of thinking about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

In the beginning, Athanasius told me,[1] God created all things and declared them good. Human beings, however, were particularly good because they were created in God's own image and given the gift of rationality in order to enable them to see God in the world around them, and thus to know and love God. To enable this knowing and loving and to prevent them from dying like all the other creatures God had made, they were placed in the Garden of Eden and given the special gift of immortality.

All, however, did not remain well. Through the disobedience of Adam and Eve humanity left the Garden with the image of God badly damaged. Two interlocking consequences for the rest of us human beings followed. First, from that time forward human lives increasingly became dominated by death and the fear of death. Second, with our reason no longer working properly, our ability to see and know God in the world and in one another was seriously impaired. Thus, living in a self-invented world of our own blind, obsessive emotions, needs, fears, and desires, we increasingly hurt ourselves and others as we lost our ability to love.

Because God loved us and intended our well-being, God would not leave us in our wounded state of sin. God sent both the laws and the prophets for our healing,

1. *St. Athanasius: On the Incarnation of God the Word*, par. 1-34 (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Press, 1953).

but neither was effective, for we still could not see reality. Then, at last, when all else had failed, God the Word, in God's own person, as God and as a human being, came among us to bring us healing, to restore to us the image of God, to uncloud our vision, to destroy the power of death, and to teach us once again the way to love.

None of this had much to do with my childhood vision of the cross dominated by images of a father God angry over my sin, and a son who, to prove his love, paid for it in my place by sacrificing himself. It was equally far from my adolescent understanding of Jesus, selflessly suffering for the hopelessly unworthy.

Indeed, in the equation "sin + love + sacrifice = salvation" the early church redefined all the terms. They did not see sin as our hopeless badness. Sin was about being blinded and wounded by our own and society's patterns of seeing, feeling, and acting so that we could not love one another or God. God did not love us sternly in spite of our unworthiness, nor was God or Jesus victimized by God's love. In fact, God was not even interested in questions of worthiness or unworthiness. For some inexplicable reason, God actually liked us, and Jesus suffered not because suffering in itself is a necessary proof of love. Rather, Jesus chose to suffer in order that the hold death had on us would be loosened and the image of God be restored in us so that we could once again learn how to love.

How good all this sounded! I lay awake night after night in the beautiful Oxford silence pondering all the gifts it would bring me if I could really believe what I was reading. In the end, I couldn't let myself believe, because to give up the older images of God and love, sacrifice and sin that it would replace would mean admitting that almost everything in my life was wrong. This included not just my relationship with God, but the very shape of my relationships with my husband, my father, my mother, and especially with myself. Even so, whether I chose it or not, the seed of the early church had been planted within me.

After three years in England, I returned to the States. I gave birth to a daughter and I began to teach college. I completed my dissertation, and I gave birth to a son. All this time, nourished by my research, my pondering, and the mysterious gift of God's grace, the seed grew and made its own space. Increasingly, it became impossible for me to live my married life under the ever growing weight of the old images of sin, sacrifice, and love. Nine years after we left England, my husband and I separated and divorced.

The next year I came to teach in Atlanta, and as the plant the seed had become began to bear very small but real fruit, all the old categories of sin, sacrifice, and love promised to be gone. At the end of that first year, half-crazed and laughing with love, I married Richard,

a curly-haired, green-eyed, gentle man who knew how to enjoy life.

Richard was an old friend and student, and I had fallen in love with him one day when I had invited him back to the house after I had run into him in the grocery store. The children were little, and that long, hot day had already been too much for me. Coming in the door with Richard behind me, I had flung myself down at the kitchen table. I remember saying, "I am so thirsty," and the next thing I remember after that is that Richard got up from his chair without a word and took down a glass from the cupboard. Then he got ice cubes from the refrigerator, added water from the tap, and brought me the glass of water. In my astonishment that a man would ever do such a thing for me I had fallen in love, and this was the man I was now married to. Richard not only loved me; he liked me. He not only wanted to share in all the household work of our marriage, he actually wanted to do things for me over and above that. He did not expect me to prove my love to him by what I was willing to give up or accept for him. He could not even understand the idea of suffering and sacrifice and unworthiness upon which my former life had been based.

During those first years of our marriage I was very literally hardly able to believe my good fortune. Half of my unbelief had to do with who Richard was himself, but the other half was caused by that old configuration of love, sacrifice, and my sense of myself as unworthy

of the sacrifice Richard must be making by loving me. I was consumed by anxiety that I would lose Richard. My fears were equally divided between worry that he would come to his senses, see me for who I was and leave me, and worry that he would get sick, have an accident—or, as my dream told me, decide to die in my place for my sins. It was at the end of those first three years that I had the dream of murder in the green-tiled bathroom.

The dream, as I knew even at the time, had been a gift of grace to help me out of the old world of my childhood and early adulthood and into the new world I had first glimpsed in my graduate school years. Over the next three years or so as I struggled with my anxieties and fears about Richard, I worked both in my prayer and out to unravel the meaning of my dream with respect both to my marriage and to the meaning of the crucifixion. In the end, even *my* heart was mostly convinced that the old way of understanding the links between love and sacrifice and sin was dead wrong. I no longer felt like an amnesiac stroke victim as I continued to teach the christology of the early church. But what *was* the meaning of the crucifixion for me? On that point I still dwelt entirely in the darkness.

It was three years after my dream that the meaning of the crucifixion began to become clear. It started with a Palm Sunday service on an ordinary gray spring day in Cannon Chapel. As usual, our family was running

late, and I was distracted throughout the start of worship. Then, we came to a dramatic reading of Mark's Passion narrative, and I found myself wholly attentive. With no effort on my part, I had gone from hearing the story as an outside observer to experiencing myself as present in the events that were being narrated as if I were someone who had known and loved Jesus personally for a long time. As I heard the reading, I watched him move through the shouting crowds on the day of palms. I heard his anguish in the garden, and I sneaked along behind the soldiers after his arrest. When at last, by the fire in the courtyard, even Peter abandoned him, angrily insisting in Jesus' hearing that he didn't even know Jesus, I couldn't take it anymore. I heard nothing after that. I left church grieving, angry at God, and totally uninterested in whatever good reasons God might have had for what was about to happen to this good man I loved so much.

The scene of betrayal by the flickering fire was still oddly alive in my mind as I stumbled through the rest of the day with my family. The next morning I awoke to an experience even odder than that of the day before. As I dressed myself, got the children off to school, went to school myself and participated in our Monday meetings, I experienced myself standing in the yellow dust of Golgotha at the very foot of the cross, and I was no longer an anonymous observer as I had been the day before. Now I stood by Jesus as his mother.

Under a blazing sun, as close as I was allowed to be, I stood there, feeling the heat radiating from the legs of this man who was my child, and my heart was breaking. All I could remember was the baby he had been, his sweetness, his arms around my neck, his nursing mouth. What I had wanted as his mother was to love him and keep him safe, and now I could not. What did I care what God's reasons were? I was not interested in explanations of sin or love or anything else. There could be no reasons for this death that were good enough for me.

As Mary, I lived through two more days of the crucifixion that week at the same time I continued to go about my everyday life. By Wednesday afternoon the vivid images and the piercing grief had faded, and I was left tired, confused, and once again entirely in my own world. I didn't know whether something terrible had happened to me or if I had been given some great gift. I think by then I hated God. As far as I was concerned, it was over. Mothers have no interest in divine explanations of the deaths of their children.

The next two days were a fog of pain and anger. Then, on Good Friday evening, I went reluctantly to church again with my family to hear the biblical account of the crucifixion. This time as I heard the familiar readings I felt drained, and the readings sounded flat. Then, we arrived at the end of the story and I heard Jesus' last words, and I was once again drawn into what I was hearing, and once again my perspective leaped. Now, as Jesus spoke those dreadful words "My God, my God,

why have you forsaken me?" I no longer heard them filtered through the pain of Jesus' human mother. Now I was hearing them from within the truly unendurable pain and yearning love of God, his heavenly mother.

Suddenly, the meaning of the Gospel narratives, Jesus' actions and his teaching, presented itself clearly to me in a way it never had before. God had never wanted, and certainly never needed, Jesus' death. Jesus himself was no passively obedient, selflessly suffering deflector of God's wrath at human imperfection. Jesus was no subordinate of God, mindlessly doing God's will in submissively loving obedience. It was Jesus who had made the choices leading to the cross.

As for God's part in the crucifixion, in that moment I couldn't imagine how I could ever have been taken in by a picture of an all-powerful, angry parent God whose love somehow demanded the blood-payment of God's own child for the sins and imperfections of the world. In the story of the prodigal son[2] Jesus himself tells a story about what God is like as a father, and as a mother, too. The story of the prodigal son is not about judgment. What does that father of the prodigal care for his son's wrongdoing? The character of the father in the story expresses itself in the willingness of his love to let his children make their own decisions about their lives, even to the point of losing them. The pain of his love is terrible as he stands there every day on his front porch,

2. Luke 15.

squinting down the road into the sun for an unlikely glimpse of the child he loves.

For parents who would never abandon their lost or wounded or dying children, for mothers and fathers who yearn to comfort and protect their daughters and sons and keep them safe, there can be no more awful words to hear than: "Mama, Daddy, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And, because out of love, God did not intervene at the cross, but let Jesus choose his own way, these were the words God heard.

As for Jesus, himself, what had Jesus chosen? Certainly not a love that requires suffering as its proof; certainly not death to pay the price for anybody's real or imagined sins. In that moment in church on Good Friday, I was able to know for the first time that, though I had sinned and sinned again, my fundamental problem was not caused by a need to repent. Hardly any of my misery from childhood on had come from my own badness; it had come from my shame at not living up to harmful yet typical family standards, shame at being female in a world that curled its lip at women, and shame over my unworthiness of the sacrifices that had characterized my mother's life as a divorced woman with children.

How could I repent of the things that had happened to me without me choosing them, of having been made a woman, of my very being? I did not need to repent. I

needed to be rescued from my shame. And this is what I now could see was exactly what Jesus as the privileged one of God, as God's own self, had chosen to do by casting in his lot not only with me but with all women and men the world would shame and reduce to nothing for simply being who they are.

And not only to the inconspicuously shamed like me and those like me, but also to the raped woman, blamed for the rape, to the divorced woman trying to support her children on a secretary's salary while her church preaches to her about "family values," to young people with blackened teeth because they can't afford the price of a dentist, to the uneducated and the ignorant, to the one with the "wrong" color skin who can't get a mortgage in his own neighborhood, to the day laborer who is treated as an animal by his employer, to the man with AIDS, to the man whose children have contempt for him because he can't find a job, to the "unmanly" man who weeps real tears, to the mentally ill old woman living in a pile of newspapers on Social Security disability, to the man who is ridiculed by his friends when they learn that he gets up in the night with his baby so that his wife may sleep, to all of these Jesus speaks:

> "Do not be ashamed. I cast in my lot with you, as God and as a human being. From the time I heard the cry of the despised slaves in Egypt, I have sought to rescue you who are shamed. Yes, you have sinned,

and you have repented in abundance, but it is the *world* that is the source of your shame, not your own sin.

"It is your suffering shame that consumes you with anger, that renders you passive, that swallows you in depression, that keeps you from loving and knowing yourself to be loved. You do not bear your shame as the rightful price you pay for some imagined unworthiness.

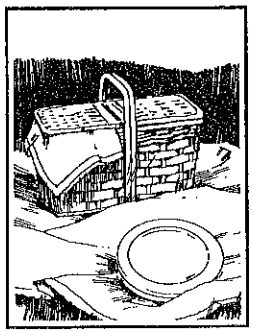
"A bruised reed, I will not break you; a smoldering wick, I will never quench you.[3] I hate the shame that binds you and destroys you, and I will prove it to you and to the world by casting in my lot with you even so far as to die a death the world finds shameful. By showing you the source and meaning of your shame, I will make a space for you to breathe and thrive. This is what I, Jesus, as a human being in the image of God, and as God's own self, chose with great joy."

Easter that year was different from what it had been any other year. Though I had much work left to do, the cross, God, Jesus, sacrifice, love, sin, my own history—none would ever be the same for me. I knew now for myself that the early church had been right. In God's active presence in Jesus' gift on and at the cross lay the possibility for the healing of our wounds, the restoring of vision, and our ability to love.

3. Isaiah 42:3.

◊ FIVE ◊

Resurrection



I always knew that the crucifixion was important, complex, about me as well as about Jesus. Even during the years when its meaning was entirely opaque to me, I could not simply let the crucifixion go without trying to understand it because I was sure my life somehow depended on it. The resurrection was another matter. It was simple and embarrassing, about Jesus and not about me. The idea of resurrection was so alien to me that, after some childhood experimentation to discover whether I could make myself believe that a dead body could come to life again, I hardly ever gave it a thought until five years ago, the spring of my forty-seventh year.