

Trained Vulnerability

John 13:31-35

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I talk with so many people who tell me how tired they are. Not just the elderly or old, overweight white men, but people of all ages. “I’m tired,” they say, when I ask them, “How are you doing?” Or, “I’m worn-out.” “I’m exhausted.”

When we think about it, it’s not difficult to see why. For the most part, most of us are “get it done” kinds of people and we have many irons in the fire. We have our jobs, if not two, at which we seek to do our best. And we have family and various other kinds of commitments and things for which we volunteer. So we’re going strong and going fast all the time. We have deadlines to meet and quotas to fill and papers to write or papers to grade and grades to turn-in. One way or another, we’re all very busy.

But there is another dimension I want to talk about that undoubtedly adds to our exhaustion and frustration. It’s what theologian Miroslav Volf calls, “low-intensity evil” or a “background cacophony of evil” (*Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 87). It is composed of all those little and sometimes not so little frustrations, irritations, hindrances, that seem so constant in our lives. They are institutional or social, or organizational in the way that whatever happens which causes disruption and interruption, no one is responsible. No matter how much we all complain, there is no one to target.

We rush out the door for work, because we're running behind, and our tire is flat or the car won't start. We call a mechanic or call into work that we'll be late. We can't get a real person on the phone and only get voice mail or a computer. And halfway into the voice mail, our phone dies.

Or we have a billing problem with our phone or our health insurance or the electric bill or take-your-pick-of-something-else, and we call and can't get a real person to talk with. Or when we get a real person they try to upgrade us, or they tell us to go online but part of the problem is that our Wi-Fi is not working, or we can't remember or find our password.

All of these things or various and innumerable other things happen with enough frequency that we find ourselves in chronic frustration which turns into chronic anger just below the surface. It grinds us down and exhausts us.

And all of this is that background cacophony. It is constant and never ceasing. It becomes that faint song, that music that is in the back of our minds. Then here and there, over time the background cacophony begins to become foreground music that sets the rhythm of our days. We read or hear historians or commentators who remind us that it didn't use to be like this. In former times, things worked like they were supposed to, children were happy and safe, cars were dependable and when they did break-down, mechanics were trustworthy and knew what to do. Back in the day we had communities, back in the day we were great. Political scientists talk about how our democracy is going to the dogs or at least to the wealthy elite. Economists talk about how much profits are being made by these same corporations that make the sorry and unreliable products but also make the wealthy elite even wealthier. Scientists tell us that these exploitative practices by

these corporations are destroying the climate and all that we hold dear. Cultural anthropologists talk about our current loss of identity, loss of the sense of place and how all places are beginning to look the same. Politicians pick up on these themes and begin to turn up the volume of the music by how these things threaten our way of life, and how “those” people, let’s say those wealthy elite, over there are a menace and we must organize against them and raise money to stop them and get out the vote. If we can just elect the right people, we will no longer suffer injustice, frustration will be a thing of the past, and darkness will turn to light. Priests and preachers add a base line to the rising melody by saying that God is on our side and that our enemy is the enemy of God and therefore, an adversary of everything that is true, good, and beautiful. We turn on the TV or turn on our computer and media and social media add a soaring descant to the music and drumbeat (see Volf, p. 88).

At this point, we hunker down, build walls, stay cozy, binge watch our favorite show, or read a comforting author. Too much chaos, too much out of control and we shut down. Of course, the risk is a lifeless shield of numbed emotions and intellectual inertia yet the musical soundtrack of our lives is set and we are tired and resentful. The cacophony has become the music of our lives. It is not simply outside of us, it has become part of us.

All of a sudden Jesus turns the music off, interrupts, and says, “I’m giving you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other” (John 13:34-35).

We look up in anger from our Facebook page Jesus just turned off, and say, “What are you talking about?! Love each other? You’ve got to be kidding. I know those people out there and there is no loving them. I’m too tired, and too resentful, and too busy, and too overwhelmed, and too much in debt, and I need to take care of myself. I can’t handle anyone else to love. Besides, I risked loving before and all I got was hurt. I’ll never do that again. Better to get back in control. Build some walls, buy some guns, and hang out only with people just like me.”

Jesus responds, “You need to change your music. I’m telling you. This is not a question and we’re not taking a vote on this. Consider this an intervention. If you’re going to profess me and say you want to follow me, I’m giving you a new command: You are to love each other.”

These are part of Jesus’ last words before his arrest and death. Chapters 13-17 are called his Farewell Discourse and central to his final instructions is love. Chapter 13 begins and ends with love. The disciples were gathered around the supper table when Jesus rose and began to wash their feet, including Judas. After teaching about foot washing and servanthood, Jesus talks about betrayal among them, his closest friends, and Judas slips out the back door. Then Jesus gives them, gives us, the new commandment to love one another just as Christ has loved us.

Jesus is giving us another way to exist. He’s giving the world another way. It’s the Way that gives Life. And paradoxically, the quickest change for Life is the slow way of loving each other and taking the time to listen to each other, and forgive one another. It means tending to one another, like tending sheep or tending a garden. It requires a trained vulnerability that does not come easily. Vulnerability

means that our life is not under our control, which means we have to learn to trust God and trust one another (Hauerwas and Coles, *Radical Ordinary*, p. 5).

Stanley Hauerwas says that he loves the Isle of Mull in Scotland. It's a place of great beauty but he says he loves it more for the roads on the island. They are all single-lane with a pullover about every five hundred yards. Driving on those roads is a constant negotiation; you see a car coming and you have to make a judgment about who should pull off first. Stanley says that to drive on Mull requires constant cooperative trust, which makes a difference for the whole community. If you stay on Mull for a while, you discover that everybody knows one another. They have a sense of one another's strengths and weaknesses. Stanley says, that's a picture of the church, learning one another's strengths and weaknesses, being open to one another, and learning to trust. That's a picture of trained vulnerability (see Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, p. 51).

Vulnerability and openness to another, trusting one another takes work. It does not come easily. It is the disciplined work of discipleship where we learn to live by a different music. It is not that we no longer have the background cacophony of evil that I talked about earlier and it is not that if we simply change our attitude, then the powers of death and evil out there simply change. We still have to face all of that but we can, by immersing our lives in the God we know in Jesus Christ, and in one another, learn to live the abundant Life of love Christ commands. Jesus tells us two chapters further on that we are to "abide" in Christ's love. Same thing. We immerse ourselves, or we abide. We live into it and that love lives into us.

Let me give you another example close to home. We have new signs on all of our doors saying no guns allowed inside this building. No open carry and no concealed carry. Previously we had those big metal signs saying the same thing because it was all we could find at the time. My point is that we have a hard time with those signs and I think part of the reason is that every time we walk into the building we are reminded of our vulnerability. We are reminded that we are not in control.

I imagine there were times in Christian history when disciples of Jesus walked into a building and saw the sign of the cross and felt the same risk, the same vulnerability of not being in control.

But every time we see those signs on our doors and every time we see a cross, we are being trained in vulnerability. We are being trained in the risky way of love instead of the way that seeks to control through guns or building walls. We are learning to embrace rather than exclude. But it is risky.

In one of his very last books, *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis examines all the famous Greek words for the concept of love and then concludes that at bottom they come down to one seminal distinction: the difference between what he calls “need love” and “gift love.”

Need love, Lewis says, is always born of emptiness. It is a vacuum that needs to be filled. A need lover sees in every beloved object or person (or church) something that he or she covets to possess. Need love moves out greedily to grasp and to appropriate for itself. In a popular image, need love sucks the essence out of

another and into itself. It does not take exceptional imagination, Lewis contends, to acknowledge that many times when we humans say to another, “I love you,” what we are really meaning is, “I need you. You have something that makes me feel better or fills some want of mine.”

In contrast, Lewis says there is what he calls gift love. Instead of being born of emptiness or lack, this form of loving is born of fullness. The goal of gift love is to enrich and enhance the beloved rather than to extract value. Gift love is more like a bountiful, artesian well that continues to overflow than a vacuum or a black hole. Lewis concludes this contrast by saying that the uniqueness of the biblical vision of reality is that God’s love is gift love, not need love. And then he says, “We humans are made in the image of such everlasting and unconditional love.” And we are to abide in such love and in turn, share it. Give it away.

It is interesting to me that four years after Lewis’ *The Four Loves* was published in 1960, Shel Silverstein published *The Giving Tree*, his extraordinary children’s book. Though these terms are not used, it’s the story of the difference between need love and gift love. The boy needs and wants and takes and receives love from the giving tree who over its lifetime share its apples, it limbs to climb in, its shade, its wood, and on and on.

Most of the time we are a mixture of both need love and gift love. And it is not that all need love is bad. Most of us showed up here at Austin Heights because we needed something. Yet as we abide and are in trained in Christ’s love, our need love is filled and redeemed, made whole into gift love.

Back to where we started and the low-intensity evil that undermines our lives – the metaphor of the cacophony of evil that surrounds us and becomes a cacophony in our hearts.

I think it is interesting that JRR Tolkien wrote his own version of the Creation story, *The Silmarillion*, using music as the metaphor for how God created everything and everyone. God – and please do not ask me to use Tolkien’s name for God because I cannot pronounce it – is the original composer and all is created by this music and then sings, plays, and improvises that original composition back to God in a kind of cosmic jam session. Evil is the distorting of the music. It brings discord and disharmony, cacophony, and eventually destruction.

We are called; commanded by Jesus to play a different tune – to participate in the originating music of love. It is risky; it is vulnerable because when we share ourselves we have no control. The music of love means learning to listen, being trained in patient listening and paying attention and being open to others, then we’ll know how to play and what to play.

Jesus invites us to come, join the band, and enjoy the music.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.