

The Future of Christian Love

In Search of Living Water

Kathlyn Tipton, Psy.D.

Preview

Book Introduction Chapter

Introduction, Premise, and Musings

“On the last and greatest day
of the festival, Jesus stood and
said in a loud voice,
‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me
and drink. Whoever believes in me,
as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.’”
John 7:37-38 (NIV¹)

Driving east from my home on the main highway, there is a large billboard with a message from an evangelism group for all to see: “When you die, you *will* meet God.”

I’m not feeling the love.

Starting with the early church and continuing today, the need and longing for Christian love are what draw people to our faith, not guilt or fear of judgment. This book is a call to my Christian community for discussion, exploration, and action in sharing and spreading God’s universal, unconditional love as it is truly and desperately needed – in flowing forth with living water into the desert.

I am not a trained minister or theologian, and I am not attempting to present this book as such. Instead, like so many of us, I share and serve in this life as a member of the body of Christ, I grow in spirit as best I can as I go through my days and years, and I thirst for God's love. My perspectives and understanding in this discussion is from the world of a child of God, a wife, sister, and friend, and a professional in educational psychology. My professional work has focused on psychological processes in human development, learning, behavior, health, and social systems.

I am also a person with multiple permanent disabilities, two of which were inflicted by others. With this I have had to fight against many obstacles in our social systems throughout my life, but I have still maintained a foundation and framework of faith and Christian love in my life and work. This faith-based orientation of life and spirit is something that is rapidly disappearing among the upper echelons of academic and service professionals in the social and behavioral sciences, among other professional disciplines. It is also disappearing throughout our popular culture in alarming, frightening ways. I am painfully aware of the losses at all levels of society as lives and worldviews defined by integrity, love, and ethics in faith diminish both among the leaders and the participants in our social systems. Attempts at filling the emptiness in life and spirit are often carelessly and hopelessly driven toward irresponsible consumerism, materialism, or other harmful lifestyle choices.

This book is not intended to be a definitive presentation, but instead a presentation of concepts, experiences, information, ideas, and suggestions to act as a springboard for exploration and discussion. If nothing else, if we need to be formally trained pastors, priests, or theologians to understand, publicly discuss, or explore our faith, its belief systems, and its applications together as a community of believers, we would be setting ourselves back into a world of darkness. After all, all followers of Christ are called to share God's word and spread His love throughout the world.

I quote or reference scripture rather liberally in this discussion where I find passages meaningful within the context. Most passages in the Bible can be interpreted and found meaningful in an assortment of ways based on varying perspectives or situations. Other people may have differing ideas based on diverse personal interpretation and meaning, or different understanding based on

advanced study or formal training. I consider one of the greatest wonders of the Bible the fact that it can be studied by anyone, anywhere, across all facets of society and education, cultures, geographic regions, and eras. Each person or group can find deep spiritual, cultural, and personal applications in its passages far beyond literality and with or without formal education or training. To me that makes the entire Bible a truly miraculous, vibrant parable, in the same manner that Jesus used parables throughout His ministry and teaching. Again, this text is not intended to be definitive, and I welcome and encourage disagreement – it enhances exploration and discussion.

I often study, contemplate, and pray about the nature and role of spirit, faith, and Christianity in my life, family, community, and world, both from professional and personal perspectives. I was raised by parents who professed Christian faith but were very poor role models of such because of their own battles in life, yet I have dutifully attended church my entire life (albeit inconsistently through substantial periods of time). I have always considered myself a child of God, and I am thankful for all He has done for me, even when I balk, get angry at Him, or become discouraged when things do not go as I think they should. I am also fully aware of the often-disregarded research and understanding in mental and medical healthcare that spiritual faith and community enhance healing, health, and quality of life, and extend our lifespans.

As we all know, inevitably there is hardship in life regardless of faith, and many among us live with devastating disadvantage or adversity. God gave humans free will from the start – me, everyone around me, and everyone who has come before me – and experiencing the consequences of our free will and the free will of others is also part of this life. Like most others, I would not want to give up my free will, but that does not stop me from becoming demoralized and angry or from complaining about the outcomes as much as anyone. It also raises countless unanswered questions about life and my purpose in this world.

I have witnessed and experienced some of the best and some of the worst this nation and our humanity have to offer, sometimes both within the same impoverished or violence-ridden community. Christ's light can shine brightly in places we might least expect. Throughout all, I have seen God at work in His amazing love and beauty even when our humanity causes suffering. Like all of us, though, I have also doubted and questioned God in response to the hardship and

suffering we all experience or encounter in innumerable ways, at times becoming quite angry and arguing with Him in despair.

Adversity is inevitably part of our lives and our world, but we all wish it was not and wonder why it must be so. I have spent countless hours considering the process and purpose of our existence in this world with both the good and the bad, talking and exploring with others at length, reading and reflecting on scripture, listening to sermons, studying what others have written, often seeking answers to questions only God can answer. Most are questions He will not answer during my life as I know it now, but asking questions, seeking truth, trying to learn, and working to fulfill our purposes in life are integral parts of our journeys.

Through all of this, as well as through advanced education and professional experience, I have come to realize that it all comes down to love, even when we do not have answers. I have come to recognize and really appreciate God's love in our lives and world, the love that I truly believe is God Himself, that is God within us, among us, and around us. Christ taught and modeled this love for us clearly, lighting our path in this journey as we seek to emulate Him and live according to His teachings. In this there is so much hope.

All God's children in this world, together, are the body of Christ. We are God's presence in this world, and we are integral parts of the love that creates, forms, and unites His kingdom. Individually and in community we are the creation of God, with Christ in our hearts establishing our connection with God and with each other.

In that we receive amazing love and grace. We also own tremendous responsibility.

"We" is every one of us, including those we both like and dislike, trust and distrust, welcome and reject, value and deprecate, respect and condemn. All of this world and everyone in it are God's creation, and as pure love God does not create anyone who is apart from His unconditional love. In this we are also to love His entire creation unconditionally as siblings in God and as the body of Christ.

It is becoming "politically correct" to disparage Christianity throughout our society, even among Christians who consider themselves liberal or progressive, to the point that many are becoming reluctant to even admit in public that they are

Christians. There is a tunnel-vision focus on all the problems and damage inflicted under the guise of Christianity, and there have definitely been plenty. These have ranged from rejection and exclusion of individuals due to differences all the way to war and even genocide, with so much devastation in between. We clearly must acknowledge and accept responsibility for these destructive behaviors and outcomes so that we can work to mend rifts and prevent further damage, while we also must recognize and celebrate the positive influences of our faith so we can promote further growth and achievement.

There has also been astounding creativity and progress due to Christian principles and faith throughout the history of this ideology and throughout the world. Some of the most prominent demonstrations of God's love by the Christian church that have led to great progress can be seen in at least two types of drives and values embedded in Christian principles. First, our emphases on mutually-supportive community and love for all with our drive for outreach and service to those living with disadvantage have stimulated the formation of important social service systems. Second, our strong value and embrace of education, questioning, and seeking wisdom have stimulated the formation of highly influential education systems at all levels of Christian societies. In turn, this has spurred enhanced education systems throughout the world.

This is the creativity that occurs through God's love as demonstrated by Christians in applying their faith, rather than the destruction that occurred through error and corruption in its applications. This popular trend in bashing Christianity is a massive obstacle to overcome – something that can only be done through true integrity in faith and in God's love as Christians.

Every human system throughout history, from the individual to the international, has the potential for both the best and the worst, the light and the dark, the creative and the destructive, and everything in between. Christianity as an ideology and social system that is interpreted and implemented by humans is no different, although it possibly has been more extreme on both ends than many. In everything we do, we must fully acknowledge and seek to learn the entirety, the full spectrum, of whatever we are addressing. If we focus entirely on either the good or the bad, our misinformed decisions and actions will inevitably range from ineffective to destructive.

When it comes down to it, we must work to mend the rifts created in the wake of “Christian” rampages. At the same time, we must speak out freely, loudly, and clearly of God’s glory. This includes boasting in all honesty and joy of the wonders living in God’s love offers our lives and world when we abide by His true intentions for us, and then generously sharing those wonders and joy in acceptance, integrity, and love with all those around us. If we cannot do these things, how can we possibly call ourselves followers of Christ and attract anyone to faith? At least we do not have to worry about being beheaded by Roman soldiers for proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and openly joining with others in Christian community.

In writing this book I am hoping to share ideas and promote exploration, discussion, and learning that might facilitate love and faith in our communities and world. I am hoping to call on God’s love to help members of the Christian community move forward and grow instead of being pummeled and squelched as we seek to spread Christ’s light, share God’s love, and flow freely and abundantly with rivers of living water.

I will first relate musings on what God’s love means within the context of Christianity and our evolving humanity, and how we might reframe our outlook to share God’s love with those who need to gain or increase love and faith in their lives. In this I will explore ideas about how we can grow rather than decline as a faith community in this nation, including welcoming, embracing, and serving with open, genuine hospitality those who often do not feel welcomed or do not feel they belong. I will use both personal and professional experience to present a discussion of concepts and possibilities for the roles of the Christian church with respect to rising generations and members of our communities who live with difference and disadvantage – people who we need as much as they need us, yet who often feel estranged, unwelcome, disregarded, or devalued.

Sing or listen to, *Let There be Peace on Earth.*

Other Sample Chapter

Chapter Seven

What are Diversity and Adversity?

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

But he said to me,

“My grace is sufficient for you,
for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

2 Corinthians 12:7 (NIV¹)

Diversity is difference – any difference in the infinite forms in which it occurs among all of us. In our diversity we are members of groups sharing sets of characteristics that are different from dominant culture norms. We are also unique as individuals in our innumerable variations of the human manifest. We are all diverse in both contexts; it is a life experience we share with everyone. It is something we can truly be proud of as we enrich each other’s lives, our communities, our nation, and our world with the flavorful seasonings of the earth and of God.

Adversity is disadvantage or hardship born of our human condition. Both diversity and adversity are universal experiences in all our lives. None of us can claim the ability or right to evade either, nor can any of us get through life without experiencing both in ways that are most often completely out of our control. However, when we encounter either diversity or adversity in others in forms that we don’t understand or that our culture has maligned, we tend to react with fear, disdain, deprecation, rejection, or an “us vs. them” sense of superiority. These reactions are natural in large part, but they lead to marginalization, discrimination, and oppression.

Contention and debates related to granting diverse and disabled people their human rights, equal rights, or equal opportunity have been the focus of tremendous interest and outcry for a very long time. This can be seen and heard throughout popular media and professional publications with no foreseeable resolution. This is an ironic statement that in itself denotes and designates

inequality and subordination. The poignant implication is that diverse individuals and groups must request and others have the power to grant or deny their “rights” or equal value as human beings. At the same time, these are entitlements people living in privilege consider inalienable for themselves without question and without having to ask for them, really without even giving it a passing thought.

Very often it is the negative attitudes, devaluation, dismissal, and discrimination experienced by those living with diversity or adversity that are the primary causes of any hardship and suffering. In truth and love, however, diversity is one of God’s amazing gifts to His children, deserving appreciation and respect rather than the contempt that is so common. We are all God’s beloved children, each of us with individual strengths and weaknesses, as well as similarities and differences with all those around us.

We are also all affected in different ways and to varying extents by the inevitable hardships, conflicts, and wounds of our human condition and experience. God knew this when He created us, and gave us each other so that no one among us is to be alone or without loving support in our journeys. In that we are all united in God and in our humanity, no one is greater than or less than anyone else, and we are each responsible for both giving and receiving care and support in love and in faith community.

The diversity among all of us enriches our world, society, communities, and each of our lives, with boundless variety in world experiences and flavors. It provides an incredible array of perspectives, life experiences, and abilities that enhance our social engagements, functions, and services as well as our work force spectrum, productivity, and advancement. It is something to celebrate with appreciation, not disdain with fear.

One of the biggest lessons for us to learn is that it is not necessary for us to understand those who are different before we can embrace them. In many respects, the greatest understanding we can attain is to understand that we do not and cannot understand. This requires relinquishing the sense of control we gain in believing we understand; however, in turn we are able to learn about others with the open, genuine curiosity of wonder in God’s miraculous creativity, without imposing our own expectations or inevitably restricted worldview. We can also embrace the infinite diversity born of God’s creativity without judgment or the

expectation of conformity. When we close our mouths, and listen with open hearts, ears, and eyes, it is amazing what we can learn from others and our world, and how much our lives and communities are enriched.

Diversity is a big part of our society and culture, including the dominant culture. Our society is built on this, and it is one of the powerful forces that has allowed this nation to achieve what it has. Diversity is what makes community and society possible, effective, progressive, and meaningful.

“Acceptance” is a popular discourse and political platform right now, even as our dominant culture continues to distrust people it sees as different or undesirable. Our social institutions tout equality, but too often in effect just categorize differences while seeking to enforce conformity with uniform standards and expectations. This communicates lack of respect for the diverse and maintains barriers or exclusion for those who cannot conform.

Another word I often hear is “tolerance,” which to me reflects and maintains barriers with a “co-exist” but remain separate attitude. Most church congregations take pride in being accepting even though they are largely homogenous for reasons we might deny. During the civil rights movement starting in the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King stated that the most segregated places in our nation were in our churches at 11:00 a.m. each Sunday morning. If you look around, not much has changed.

Throughout the course of our country’s history, many diverse groups and individuals have been deeply wounded by the misguided beliefs and attitudes of the dominant culture and influential privileged. Discrimination is still rampant among us. Correcting this will take a major cultural shift that starts with each one of us and builds from there as we all join hands in solidarity.

It is absolutely necessary for all of us to work together to learn about and appreciate our differences, redefine our cultural expectations, and change the course of the social systems in our communities and throughout the nation. As bastions of God’s love and oases of faith community, our churches should accept responsibility in proactively taking the lead. Starting with ourselves and each other and working outward from there, we need to do all we can to speak out, instigate, and facilitate the following processes:

- Accepting responsibility, and asking for forgiveness with truth and genuineness of heart from those who have been wounded. For those of us living as members of the dominant white culture, even if we have not demonstrated hate or directly participated in discrimination or oppression ourselves, we have inevitably benefited from our white privilege.
- Working to mend the rifts created by discrimination.
- Establishing universal social acceptance and expectations regarding appreciation of diversity without demand for unnecessary conformity, including equal value and social justice for all those in our nation.
- Facilitating healing and improved quality of life for those who have been wounded.
- Ensuring solidarity as a society of diverse people and groups in beloved community, unified as a nation and as the unconditionally inclusive body of Christ.

Let us start to envision and explore these undertakings. Each step we take in the right direction is movement towards progress and peace for our world.

We try to welcome diverse people and make them feel accepted and part of our community when they come to us, but are we willing to move beyond such passive acceptance? I would now like to plant a seed – to see if I can start people thinking about taking the next step in the hope of nurturing growth.

Diversity is much more than appearance or superficial features. When people talk about acceptance of diversity, most think about skin color, culture, language, and religion. Others move beyond those and consider things like socioeconomic status, gender identity and sexual orientation, and disability. The list of potential differences goes on. That's a great first step. When people think about disability, things like wheelchairs and artificial limbs, white poles with red ends, and hearing aids. Back braces and pacemakers come to mind. That is also a good start, but it is not all there is.

Acceptance is where to start, but we also need to begin thinking about progressing to appreciation – stepping out, reaching out, welcoming, supporting, and truly valuing diverse people in love, creating the experience of belonging and reciprocity in community for everyone. When we strive to learn about and embrace those who are different, we can truly recognize, foster, and celebrate the wonderful

contributions these people can make to our lives as individuals, as well as to our churches, communities, and society as a whole.

If nothing else, as Christians, we're a group within this nation that is rapidly becoming a subculture and maligned by many, joining the ranks of those considered different and unacceptable. We should be starting to gain an inkling of what it means to be pushed aside within our own culture, to just be another unwanted fragment in a society broken apart by discriminatory perceptions and attitudes. It is time to reach out and unite with all those in our communities in appreciation of the diversity God created among us and in Christian love, recognizing and upholding everyone as siblings in Christ and as equal in God's eyes and heart.

If we are to truly strive to become united participants in the infinitely inclusive and expansive love and kingdom of God, maybe we need to try to reframe and envision our faith families and church communities through God's eyes. Maybe our churches should not just be defined as family and friends who attend church services or functions or those listed in our church membership rosters. Instead, when "church" is understood to be God's family, it becomes everyone in the communities in which our congregations reside and serve. After all, all those out there are born of God and are therefore our sibling in Christ, all together our family in God. They do not have to attend our church, they do not have to call themselves Christian, they do not have to believe in God at all, to be our family in God.

Everyone out there needs the embrace and care of God's love as much as we do, even though many, especially those who are different from us, often need it presented and shared in different ways. It is our responsibility to actively reach out with love and embrace all those out there as much as we do for each other, with kindness, respect, and support for differences. As people of faith, it is our responsibility more than any others to be role models and leaders in embracing, loving, and supporting all God's children, all our family in God, even if it means stepping out of our comfort zones. People in need will not come to us unless we go out among them, lift them up in love and care, and demonstrate what living in God's love and in faith community offers their lives.

Jesus used an analogy of shepherds during one of his discussions with some Pharisees. In their self-righteousness, privilege, comfort, and judgment, the

Pharisees were seeking to accuse and condemn Him for going out among the lowly, including the diverse and disadvantaged, associating and eating with outcasts and those considered sinners. Jesus related that shepherds do not sit passively with their flocks when sheep become cast or are lost. Instead, they run to set the cast upright and back on their feet with care, or they go out and actively seek the lost sheep until they find them, embracing them and returning with them on their shoulders, rejoicing in their recovery.

When we move beyond just opening our doors to walking out those doors, into our communities, and side-by-side with all our neighbors to share God's love, our church family becomes God's family. When we are fully inclusive, and we respect, value, support, and accommodate differences, disadvantage, and special needs, we love as God loves. When go out and walk with them, loving and embracing everyone without enforcing our laws or demanding adherence to beliefs and practices specific to our culture, we are following the teachings and the path of Christ. In doing this everyone in our communities can see and experience God's love, and God will take it from there.

It is also not about having congregations that are statistically or proportionally representative of the demographic distributions of our communities. It is not about quota recruiting. It is all about reaching out and embracing everyone who needs God's love with full inclusion and joyful abandon, delighting in everything each person has to offer our communities and our lives, appreciating and growing from the richness diverse people add to our congregations. Let us forget about counting and categorizing.

It is all about love.

Sing or listen to, *Just as I Am*.