

A little while back, a dear friend texted a simple invitation. “You and Becca want to come for dinner? We’re still not ready for people yet, but we’d love to have the two of you.” You see, by the time that text arrived, they’d had a whole string of family tragedies. Each night passed without sleep, and each morning met with hesitation, as if to say “Even if I could get out of bed, what fresh and terrible news would I hear today?” The family had long since circled their wagons, trying to deal with that unfair bombardment of tragedy. So that simple invitation, brought Becca and me to a new place with them. We’d shared countless meals but none this somber. And we’d been there for all sorts of life events, but none this raw. They asked us into that open wound with ‘em. There is nothing to say in that space. I hurt for them, cried as their tears dampened my shoulder and their shudders chilled my bones. That’s a tender place, delicate and intimate and almost forbidden. We don’t talk about that place. We go there, far too often we go there alone, but we put on a brave face. We fool ourselves into thinking that that pain isn’t meant to be shared. We’ll laugh with friends, we might even cry a little, but we reserve sorrow for those times we’re alone. Or, that sorrow waits until we’re alone to wash over us, and then we’re ashamed for not being strong enough to keep our heads above the waves.

For what it’s worth, I think that might be a sin. Not a personal sin, but a sin of society because society says sorrow is taboo. We aren’t supposed to talk about it, we aren’t supposed to admit to hard days that turn into hard years, we aren’t supposed to let people see our pain because we think that pain means we’re weak. So we don’t talk about it. We stuff it down, we pretend reality isn’t what it really is, and we move on, carrying the great weight of tragedy while the rest of the world pretends it’s ok, too. And then we’re all left to suffer on our own, bearing our own pain while the person next to us suffers in silence, too. And that cycle, repeated every day, leaves us incapable of dealing with pain, and tragedy piles on top of tragedy. My friends’ suffering needed someone to share it, needed someone to bear it for a moment. They didn’t need wise words. All they needed was love. And I didn’t know how to love them. So I sat, and I sobbed, and I ate, and I sobbed, and I hugged, and I sobbed. And then, when someone finally cracked a joke, I took my leave, and I sobbed some more. Turns out, that clumsy love was exactly what they needed.

There’s a scene in Jesus Christ Superstar where Mary Magdalene paces through the disciples’ camp, trying to figure out what she’s feeling for Christ. “I never thought I’d come to this,” she sings, “I don’t know how to love him.” But she stays. Sobbing and silent, unable to put words to the truth she feels in her bones, she stays. That’s love: resonant, stone-still, aching, lost and alone and somehow holy. Before we heard today’s readings, we prayed these words: “God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding; pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things ... may obtain your promises.” Recognizing God in all things and having something drawn out in response, that’s love. Something holy resides in all things, in all peoples, in all times. There’s even something holy in sadness. And each of us sees a little more of God as all those loves come together.

Back in that somber living room, my friends’ deep pain was holy, showed me something of God. And my awkward groping for words and choking them down in favor of silence might have had some holy to it. But those shared tears and shoulder-heavy sighs were holy, too. There was God in those people, and God’s love poured out. Standing above the crowd, Peter knew this, but the crowd was floored to learn that God’s love just might be for them, too. As Jesus puts it, there is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for a friend. Elsewhere in John’s letter, that expands from laying down your life for a friend to laying down your life for others. You don’t even have to know someone to love them.

As I've watched all sorts of goings on over the past few months, I've picked up on a frustrating trend. There are all sorts out there trying to love and encourage others to love. There are countless hurdles, but what gets me is the kind of resistance they keep encountering. The pattern is maddening, and if you haven't caught it yet, you will. When someone pops up reminding the world to love, it's incredible what kind of vitriol they receive. Vitriol that offers no alternative solution, just dismissive obstruction. The examples are myriad and contentious, but a quick one's all those college protests. Now, I'm sure there are a million ways to come at pursuing peace, but this is what they've chosen to do. They've seen nonstop coverage of people on the other side of the world experiencing the same kind of loss my friend shared in her living room, and their hearts ache. They're trying to stop a genocide, but nationwide, the response is a whole slew of folks shaking their heads and saying either "it'll never work" or "they're too young to know any better." Sometimes those naysayers don't even use words; as it turns out, canisters of teargas convey a pretty powerful message on their own.

What bugs me the most isn't just the attacks on students or the debate about how effective divestment may be. What bugs me is that those students are so driven by empathy and a desire for a better future for everyone, that they're willing to risk laying down their lives. Meanwhile, so much of the response refuses to engage productively and instead opts to silence them. If teargas and riot police can't solve the problem, graduation will, and then we can all put this behind us. But y'all, graduation doesn't fix Gaza. Teargas doesn't fix Gaza. Divestment might, I don't know. But I do know there are almost no solutions offered in its place. The message is clear. Don't speak up, don't critique, don't love if it means seeking change. "Love the world, sure, but be warned if you actually try to do anything about it." Last week, I said real love is earth-shattering. This is what I mean. Now, I'm not gonna say those students are totally blameless, but love is so powerful that a group of 'em apparently warrant billy clubs, zip ties, and 2,000 arrests. Sidebar, it's also bizarre that so many expect those students to risk their lives without fighting back, as if to say, "I'd be more likely to listen to them if only they'd die." But this isn't new. The Christian story revolves around a world-changing love that apparently warranted the force of an empire. See, love can be sweet and comforting and deeply kind, but it can also be impassioned, protective, self-sacrificing, and the powers that be have no answer for the latter. How do you stop love when love lays down its life just to show how far that love can go to reach you?

Look, I don't know what the way forward is with that or just about anything else. But what I do know is that the side of love is the side I want to be on, no matter where that lands me. There are so many ways to love, I sure don't know all of 'em. And I certainly don't know all there is to know about God. Sometimes, I don't even know how to serve God, or like Mary Magdalene, I don't always know how to love God. But something about God draws love out of us, even when words fail and our understanding of the world muddles further. But thanks be to God, when the world suffers, when friends suffer, when strangers suffer we don't have to know the answers. All we have to know is love. From there, well, I'm not gonna tell ya it gets easier, but the path does get clearer. Once you go down that path and find where love is, you have found God. And once you've found God, you will know deeper and deeper the truth that there is no greater love than this, to lay down our lives for love.