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January 8, 2019

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"God never promised us that we would not suffer." Those words struck a painful, but truthful, chord in me when a friend uttered them as we stood talking at the wake of a 27-year-old woman, a mother of a 1-year-old and wife who died of cancer way too young.

We stood there witnessing the pain one instinctively feels no one should ever have to endure, if our God is a loving God — if, in fact, our God *is* love. And yet the reality is that Christianity does not teach us that we will not suffer. The opposite is true. Love leads to suffering.

Buddhism recognizes this great truth in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, and one is encouraged to love without attachment, without desire, without trying to hold on to what or who we love. Christianity also teaches that to love is to suffer — to suffer for and with others, exemplified in the crucified Christ who stretched out his arms and died for love. God's response to our suffering is to suffer with us on the cross and to resurrect that suffering into new life. Still, knowing all of that, I could not be anything but devastated by the untimely death of this young woman. How could I trust God in the face of such tragedy?

I had not fully realized, prior to that point, that my idea of God was a God who fixed things, who would make things turn out all right in the end. That image of God, I discovered, is the God of the privileged, the God of those who have not suffered. I find since then, when I talk to people, there is a divide in how people know God — those who have suffered great tragedy and those who have not. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, suffering is "the great iconoclast" — my idols could not hold up.

In his book *The Eternal Year*, theologian Karl Rahner suggests that when one experiences the absence of God, one's image of God is no longer working. The only way to rebuild trust in the face of such absence is to let go of the image and surrender to the mystery. God as love does not promise that we will not suffer. God promises us that when we do suffer, we are held in love. God does not promise to fix what is broken; God promises to be present in the midst of the brokenness.

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That source of love we call God is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, the word of love among us, and in the Holy Spirit, God as love enacted within us and among us.

The only antidote to the brokenness of the world is to surrender to love, to let that love act in us and through us, even when we know it may ultimately lead to heartbreak.

Love and trust in a finite world are doomed to disappointment. Beyond the inevitable experience of death, our lives are also littered with broken promises, betrayals, people in their humanness letting us down time and again, or perhaps our own humanness and brokenness leading us to sabotage our relationships. We experience this human brokenness in our lovers, our families and our friends.

So the real question becomes, how is it that we continue to go on loving? Why do we continue to take the chance with our hearts to trust again, to give someone a second chance, or to start all over again with someone new? Rahner suggests that our desire to trust another human being wholly is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. One who loves a fallible human being in some way affirms the one human person who does not disappoint, who is the perfect expression of God as Love in the world.

Scripture tells us we love because God first loves us ([1 John 4:19](#)). Humans cannot exist without love. God created us to be in relationship, to love. Psychology and neuroscience have demonstrated what mystics have taught us to perceive with the eye of the soul: that we are hardwired for love. Our brains have a whole pharmacy of neurochemicals that facilitate love, desire and attachment, and enable us to experience trust, generosity, altruism and empathy. Judith Horstman in *The Scientific American Book of Love, Sex and the Brain: The Neuroscience of How, When, Why and Who We Love*, explains how in brain imaging research, it can be seen that love "lights up" our brains.

As interesting as the parts of the brain that are active, according to Horstman, are the parts that tend to be less active: fear, grief and self-protection. So when we read in Scripture that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18), there is a truth to that statement on a physical as well as spiritual level. Love indeed does drive out fear. Thus the very way our brain works helps us continue to risk love in an era of distrust. Love, a spiritual realization, manifests and becomes the antidote for distrust.

We continue to love because we must, if we are going to be human. My relationship with God is now changed, but the relationship endures. I don't expect God to "fix"

things anymore. The miracle for which I now pray is not to have the outcome of the story changed, but rather how I might manifest God's love in the midst of the grief and suffering of the world. My relationship to God as Love is manifested in my ability to love others, to love my neighbor as myself. God as source and ground of our love enables us to continue taking the risk to love, even when we have been devastated by love in the past.

And so we take the risk again and again to love other human beings, despite their tendency to disappoint and to die, and to love God who has enabled us to love by first loving us.

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A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 11-24, 2019** print issue under the headline: We continue to take the risk to love.