



SPRING 2026 ISSUE OF THE WRITER SHOWCASE

ENGAGING WITH THE SCRIPTURES

A CREATIVE JOURNEY THROUGH ACTS,
LETTERS, AND REVELATION

WORD *on* FIRE
INSTITUTE

Contents

Introduction iv

POETRY

- “Shopping Revelation”** (Rev 3:20) – Andrea Rosenberg, St. Gertrude and St Hildegard Writing Groups 3
- “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost”** (1 Cor 4:11) – Betty Glaz, St. Clare of Assisi and St. John Henry Newman Writing Groups 5
- “Pilgrims and Strangers on Earth”** (1 Pet 2:11) – Giovanna Garbelli, St. Francis de Sales Writing Group 7
- “What Happened Inside Your Mind Transforming”** (1 Cor 1:20–25) – Pamela L. Longo, St. Jerome Writing Group 9
- “The Storm”** (Acts 27:29) – Tim E. McGuire, St. Hildegard of Bingen Writing Group 22
- “A Rush To Believe”** (Acts 16:13–15) – Andre F. Lijoi, St. Catherine of Bologna Writing Group 13

FICTION

- “Stone Cold”** (Acts 7:54–60) – Elizabeth Dusold, St. Faustina and St. Venantius Writing Groups 16
- “An Unlikely Candidate”** (1 Cor 1: 26–28) – Jim Benjamin, St. Faustina Writing Group 21
- “Strong Wine”** (1 Cor 2:2–5) – Marsha Hauser, St. Faustina Writing Group 27
- “We’ll Meet on the Other Shore”** (Acts 9:36–42) – Jennifer Tan, St. Thomas More and St. Francis de Sales Writing Groups 31
- “Bridget Fawcett’s Confession”** (2 Cor 5: 17–20) – Helena Turner, St. Gertrude the Great Writing Group 37

“The Face of Beauty” (Jas 2:1–5) – Erika M. Walker, St. Gregory the Great and St. Gertrude Writing Groups	43
“Where There Is Good” (1 Pet 3:15) – Maura Manktelow Sweeney, St. Anselm and St. Clare of Assisi Writing Groups	49
“All Things New” (Rev 21:5) – Michele Cohen, St. Thomas More Writing Group	54
“Hope of Gain” (Acts 16:16–19) – Katharine Tarvainen, St. Gregory the Great and St. Bede Writing Groups	59

DEVOTIONAL

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).

“All We Need is Love” (1 John 4:7–11) – Matt Ritzert, St. Jane de Chantal Writing Group	66
“Heart to Heart Conversations with God the Father” (Eph 1:17) – Lisa Machado, St. Hildegard of Bingen and St. Jane de Chantal Writing Groups	69
“Hope That Endures” (Rom 5:5) – Christine McParland Rossi, St. Thomas More Writing Group	72
“Keep Going, Love” (1 John 3:18–24) – MJ Meister, St. Jane de Chantal Writing Group	75
“Hope Amidst Fear” (Rev 20) – Jonathan M. Henry, St. John Henry Newman Writing Group	78

Engaging with the Scriptures: A Creative Journey Through Acts, Letters, and Revelation

ISSUE 5 / SPRING 2026

Welcome to the Spring 2026 issue of the *Institute Writer Showcase*, which explores the creative and spiritual richness of the New Testament, completing the project begun with Issue 3 (Spring 2025), on the theme of “Exploring the Gospels.”

In this issue, writers took their inspiration from particular passages of Scripture from the Book of Acts, the Letters, and the Book of Revelation, a diverse and challenging selection of texts which are less well known than the Gospels, even to many Christian readers. Some authors chose to engage directly with religious themes, always in a way that is accessible and inviting to readers who are not Christians or who are not familiar with the Bible; others chose to be implicit and allusive, leaving it up to the reader to discover the threads of connection—or simply to allow the imaginative seed to grow in its own time.

We begin this issue with poetry in a range of forms and styles, followed by a selection of short stories that includes realistic contemporary fiction, historical fiction, and fantasy. Lastly, we close with a reflective coda offered by a selection of devotionals.

As always, each individual piece is linked in the table of contents below; the entire issue in PDF booklet form can be found at the end of the table of contents, by clicking “See Full Issue.” Readers are encouraged to share individual pieces and the full issue, electronically or in print; just make sure that the author and original publication (the *Institute Writer Showcase*) is clearly indicated.

Lastly, I am happy to emphasize that every one of these pieces has been workshopped within the Writing Community’s small Writing Groups, as indicated by each author’s byline, and abides by

the Writing Community's policy prohibiting the use of generative AI in any way, at any stage in the writing process, from idea generation to final editing (a policy that I follow myself as editor and as a writer and teacher). Every thought and word in these pieces is entirely human authored and has been workshopped and selected through human judgment. This choice to emphasize human creativity, human dignity, and the responsible use of environmental resources has not been limiting, but rather productive in the best sense: not mechanically and artificially so, but in a genuinely fruitful and rewarding way.

Happy reading!

—Dr. Holly Ordway, editor, *Institute Writer Showcase*

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POETRY



Shopping Revelation

(Rev 3:20)

ANDREA ROSENBERG

St. Gertrude and St. Hildegard Writing Groups

Mart of abundance
O Goods, aisles of everything
All my needs met here!

I wander transfixed, fed by shelves, products,
Specials, exclusives,

This-week-only, this week only, for you alone,
the lowest price ever,
the cart of shards is full, glittering.

I barely heard the knock upon the door.
I might have heard a bell ring in my chest.
There might have been a rustle in a tree.
I might have seen a jeweled arch somewhere.
A whisper from a ragged prophet's mouth.
I maybe heard a quiet voice that called,
That called my name, determined, not resigned.
I maybe left my shopping cart behind,
And left the best deal ever there—so what?

And found the voice that called to me, and there,
Heaving a great sigh, not looking back,
Unlocked and opened wide the Holy Door.
The good deals vanished, good-bye splashy wow.

Lantern-lit, a patient gravel path,
Blue rose, transparent river, quiet grass.



Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

(1 Cor 4:11)

BETTY GLAZ

St. Clare of Assisi and St. John Henry Newman Writing Groups

My face is grotesque,
and people are afraid of me.
They cross the street
or search for cracks in the sidewalk.
See that family over there?
They, too, refuse to look at me.
I was once like them,
had a wife and two kids
but they're all gone now,
left me years ago—
before my face became ugly.
One night, wrapped in a tattered blanket,
asleep under a bridge,
three guys jumped me, beat me,
stabbed something, a screwdriver, I don't know what—
into my eye,
They took the blanket
and nearly seized my eye.
It never healed right,
protrudes from the socket, red and runny.

Here comes a three-piece suit.
“Hey, buddy, got any extra change?
I haven’t eaten since yesterday?”
Yeah, go on by. Don’t look at me.
I didn’t expect my life to be like this.
Are you afraid of what you might become someday?
Well I was once like you.
I was a Boy Scout, an altar boy.
I’m a father, son, and a brother.
In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.



Pilgrims and Strangers on Earth

(1 Pet 2:11)

GIOVANNA GARBELLI

St. Francis de Sales Writing Group

All you pilgrims and strangers on earth,
In search of the heavenly home,
Fully grasped by the calling of Christ,
You are visible signs of His Love.

You embraced the command of the Lord,
Of the Lamb who was nailed to the cross.
From the hidden request of that wood
Gush forth springs of unending self-gift.

This command is to follow His lead,
Wholly loving and serving all men,
And to listen in the depths of your hearts
To the promise and will of the Father.

O you steward of peace, and the Church,
Who received for her graces divine,
Once transformed in servants of Christ,
You radiate His pure light through all ages.

By now welcomed at the feast of the King,
You shine forth as a beacon of hope,
While we wait in unfaltering faith,
To re-join you in the heavenly Realm.
Amen.



What Happened Inside Your Mind Transforming

(1 Cor 1:20–25)

PAMELA L. LONGO

St. Jerome Writing Group

What happened inside your mind transforming
In the space between before and after
As words unsettled all you thought you knew:
“Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where
Is the debater of this age? Has not
God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

Folly, some might say, to dismiss the wise,
To risk untethering faith and reason.
Could you believe a boast of God’s power
Not just to destroy but to make whole all
That is broken, to break the brokenness
In you? Could you allow Him to upend
The vanities that detached you from Him,
Accept His weakness over your own strength?

Was it doubt or fear you had to surmount
To hear Christ proclaimed crucified and know
He was making all things new in your midst?

What recklessness, what trust, did it take to
Become the holy fool when you thought you
Were always destined to become a sage?

Did your heart sink or soar as you realized
The Cross changed the logic of this world
And required a change in you? How long
Did old ambitions turn over in your
Mind, haunting your dreams because you knew you
Must abandon them, or did it unnerve
You more to awake to the depth of the
Call and perceive your own smallness? How long

Did you wrestle with the words until they
Settled in your heart and became your strength?



The Storm

(Acts 27:29)

TIM E. MCGUIRE

St. Hildegard of Bingen Writing Group

“Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.”

When a storm arises, a walk becomes a quest.
A hat guards the head from slashing rain
but constant grip means the arm gets no rest.

The long coat thought sufficient to the day
flaps its feeble wings to flee the fierce gale.
Darkness looking back, forward the only way.

Ice sags the power lines as well as the heart.
Windblown trees wag their heads at your conceit;
how were you so foolish to even start?

You brought walking shoes to a hiking-boot fight.
Precipitous paths mock over-confidence.
Now might be the time to ask, *pray* for light.

Nothing left but plead that someone toss a rope.
Struggling, doubting, crying, help out of reach—

then faith's fibers fan out securing hope.

Storms frighten with hail we can't withstand.

Anchors steady boats, gravity holds earth

but you—you are stardust in his hand.



A Rush To Believe

(Acts 16:13–15)

ANDRE F. LIJOI

St. Catherine of Bologna Writing Group

A bright white orb
heralded a new day and
reflected blue-silver, blinding light,
like a knight's flashing saber,

lighting a baptistry
on the banks of the Zygatis
tree lined, an oasis of green
at Philippi where Paul

ushered Christianity west
baptizing a certain Gentile woman
a dealer in deep purple cloth
and red dyes.

Widowed in life you traded the regal
color of your cloth for the white veil of
a bride of Christ.

Faith, light, awe, love flowed west.

Not yet Christian your fervor for Jesus
delivered your entire house
to be baptized with you
an evangelist before your time.

What inspired your rush to believe?

Plunged into water
forever transformed by Jesus
you received an indelible mark
rendering you a child of God
for eternity bringing Light.

FICTION



Stone Cold

(Acts 7:54–60)

ELIZABETH DUSOLD

St. Faustina and St. Venantius Writing Groups

Fr. Stephen Neuhaus crossed the lawn from the parish hall to the rectory, exhausted from a full day of meetings about support for America's war effort. The priest's full-length black cassock had trapped the July heat, soaking his shirt in sweat. He had arrived in Kentucky five years ago from Germany, but he hadn't yet adapted to the sweltering summers.

A flash of white caught Fr. Stephen's eye as he walked up the steps to the porch. He crossed the porch and read a large white placard nailed to the front door:

“IN KENTON COUNTY
AMERICANS WILL NOT
OTHERS MUST NOT

1st Circulate German Language Newspapers.

2nd Subscribe for Them.

3rd Or Read Them.

4th Or Have Them in Possession.

5th Or Advertise in Them.

6th Or Buy from Those who Advertise in Them

One Country – One Allegiance

One Language

Beginning August 1, 1918, the C. P. L. asks Compliance with these Suggestions.

VERBUM SAP”

Fr. Stephen ripped the placard from its nail. He shook his head at the Latin, “*Verbum Sap,*” wondering how such a hateful message could be “a word to the wise.” He put his shoulder to the front door, which was swelled tight from the humidity, and shoved it open. With a sigh, he placed the torn placard on the table in the hall and climbed the stairs to his bedroom. He removed his cassock and Roman collar, as well as his sweat-soaked shirt, and donned a fresh black shirt from the closet, grateful to leave his collar open. Although the window stood open, no breeze stirred. The humid air hung over the room like a pall.

Fr. Stephen returned downstairs to the kitchen. The housekeeper had left a plate of cold chicken and potato salad in the ice box for his supper and the *Kentucky Herald*’s evening edition on the table. He poured himself a glass of milk and sat down. After saying a simple grace over his meal, he scanned the headlines. The lead article reported that over fifteen thousand people had attended the Citizens Patriotic League’s Fourth of July. The front-page photo showed Commonwealth Attorney Paul Blake presiding over the rally, his fist raised in the air. The League had posted placards throughout the city of Covington and delivered them personally to the staff at the *Volksblatt* and *Freie Presse*, the popular German-language newspapers. *So, we aren’t alone in getting a warning,* he thought.

Anti-German sentiment had continued to build since America had declared war on Germany last year. Fr. Stephen and some of the men in the parish had been required to register as “enemy aliens.” Parishioners had told the priest that their shops had been vandalized.

Others had reported being harassed and beaten by members of the League. The unrest weighed heavily on the priest, and he feared for the safety of his flock of German immigrants and their descendants.

As he ate his supper, Fr. Stephen reflected on the events of the day. This morning, the ladies of the parish Red Cross Society had been knitting in the parish hall. *God bless them for making socks and scarves in this heat*, he thought. The nuns had sought his approval of a pen pal project, suggesting that the school children could write letters to the young men from the parish who had enlisted in the US Army. The Ladies Sodality had brought him their plans for an ice cream social on Bastille Day, following President Wilson's request that all Americans honor the French holiday this year. Tonight he had met with the Finance Committee to hear their plans for another Liberty Bond fundraiser. Fr. Stephen had even pledged to buy a bond himself. *Will any of this convince the League of our loyalty to America?* he wondered.

A loud banging on the front door interrupted Fr. Stephen's thoughts. He moved to the parlor where he could see through the front window. Several men stood on the porch and a dozen more gathered on the lawn. In the darkness he did not recognize any of them. He tugged the door open about six inches and poked his head out. Before the priest could speak, an angry voice demanded, "Father Stephen Neuhaus?" A hand reached in and grabbed his shirt front.

The priest braced himself against the doorframe to resist, but two men reached for his arms and another man dragged him onto the porch. A tall man stepped forward. Fr. Stephen recognized Paul Blake from the photo in the newspaper, his stiff, white collar and handlebar mustache oblivious to the heat. Blake jabbed his finger into Fr. Stephen's chest. "Where is the placard that was posted here this morning? Those placards are not to be defaced or removed."

"You have no authority to post that placard," Fr. Stephen said in his German-accented English. "This is the property of the Catholic Church."

“The Citizens Patriotic League has all the authority it needs to weed out you Hun lovers,” Blake sneered. “The League is enforcing President Wilson’s sedition laws. We know you preach in German. No doubt you’re whipping up sentiment for the Kaiser.”

“My older parishioners understand the gospel better when they hear it in German. We are preaching the good news, not anything about the war.”

“We know your kind. Hiding behind the church, but undermining the American war effort,” Blake said. The men shouted their assent and crowded in, some spitting on the priest.

“Many of the young men of our parish are in France right now, fighting for this country,” Fr. Stephen protested. “Some of these families came from Alsace, the very part of France the Germans conquered less than fifty years ago. They hate German militarism as much as you do.”

Cries of “Hun lover,” “traitor,” and other slurs drowned out the priest’s words. Two men grabbed Fr. Stephen and dragged him down the steps into the yard. The men circled closer, hitting and kicking Fr. Stephen. The priest cried out, “Aren’t you all members of other Christian churches in town? Don’t we all worship the same Jesus Christ? We are all called to be peacemakers.”

The priest’s words infuriated the mob. How dare this papist question their faith! One of the men punched Fr. Stephen in the gut, knocking the wind out of him and causing him to fall to his knees. Another man grabbed a large stone from the garden border and heaved it at the priest. The stone gashed Fr. Stephen’s forehead, and blood flowed towards his eyes. More men picked up stones and hurled them at the priest. Fr. Stephen raised his arms, shielding his head. Someone found a shovel in the garden and began to beat him.

Fr. Stephen heard his ribs crack and his breath came in ragged gulps. Pain engulfed him. He struggled to hold up his head. Blood obscured his vision. “Please stop,” he begged. “Jesus, save me.”

The vigilantes continued to beat and kick the priest. With his strength failing, Fr. Stephen raised his eyes to heaven and said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." With this prayer, the priest lost consciousness and slumped to the ground.

"We don't need your prayers, you German scum," someone yelled. The blows from fists, boots, and rocks landed unceasingly on the motionless form on the ground.

Paul Blake stood on the porch, apart from the chaos in the yard. He unrolled another copy of the placard and fixed it on the nail in the rectory door. Blake turned and addressed the crowd. "OK, men, I think our message has been delivered. I'll see you at our next League meeting."

As the crowd dispersed, walking in groups of two or three towards their homes, one of the men came up to Blake. "Mr. Blake," the man said, wringing his hands, "I think the priest is dead."

"One less Hun to worry about," Blake replied. "Leave him there as an example to the rest of them." Blake stepped off the porch, satisfied with the evening's work. As he turned to walk home, he considered his next move.



An Unlikely Candidate

(1 Cor 1: 26–28)

JIM BENJAMIN

St. Faustina Writing Group

Fr. George Bennett stood outside after the noon Mass in the cool, early spring breeze. *I wish I'd brought my jacket*, he thought, as parishioners streamed by. He was hungry, and his knees hurt. Nevertheless, he tried to smile warmly. “Thanks, Father, for your homily.” “Father, can you come for dinner Wednesday evening?”

“What’s on the menu, Mrs. Thompson?” he joked. “Just kidding. It’s so hard for me to watch my diet with your wonderful desserts! Maybe you could make Jell-O?” They both grinned.

Someone else touched his shoulder. “Fr. George, say a prayer for my husband. He’s having heart surgery this week.”

“I knew it was coming up soon, Carla. Would he like me to stop by and anoint him?”

“Father, that would be very kind of you. Mike would be delighted. He’s a bit worried.”

“Do me a favor, and let the secretary know when a good time would be. I’ll be there.”

Carla smiled and touched his arm. “Father, you are very kind. Thank you.”

The priest was about to turn away and go back to the sacristy to remove his vestments. *Well, one more Mass finished. Maybe I can take a nap after lunch. I wish my knees didn’t ache so much.*

“Fr. George, can I talk with you?”

José had come up behind him. The priest smiled again, recognizing the squat, swarthy man. José Gomez was the parish’s janitor; he often attended daily Mass and always cleaned up the church after the liturgies, putting the hymnals away and stacking the bulletins in a neat pile.

“Oh, hello, José,” said the priest. “What can I do for you?”

José looked apprehensive. “I don’t want to be no trouble, Father.”

“I think I have a ham and cheese sandwich waiting for me in the rectory. Would you like to share it with me? My kind cook always makes a very large sandwich for me.”

“Sure, Father. Thanks.”

Indeed, there was a large ham and cheese sandwich in the refrigerator, made with three slices of bread, mustard and a plate of lettuce and tomatoes on the side.

“I told you there’d be enough, José. Have a seat.”

They sat down around the small wooden table in the kitchen. Fr. George cut the sandwich in half and gave José a plate and a napkin.

“Did you ever hear my brother’s favorite grace before meals, José?”

The man shook his head.

“Bless the meat; now let’s eat!” They both chuckled.

José said, “In our house when I was growing up, we’d say “¡Bendecir la mesa!”

“Short and sweet.”

“But my hungry brother Tomás couldn’t even wait that long,” said José.

Fr. George chuckled again, then asked, “What’s on your mind, José?”

“Father, some of the parishioners said I should become a deacon, and I wanted your advice.”

“Is that something you want to do?” the pastor asked.

José said, “Since Margarita Sanchez and Maria Ricardo-Jimenez mentioned it to me, I been thinkin’ about it.” He hesitated then asked, “Father, you need a deacon here?”

“I could always use some help. You know, with the priest shortage I haven’t been able to have an associate pastor for the past five years. I should warn you, José. The diaconate is a demanding ministry. It requires five years of preparation. There is course work on church history, the saints, Mary, the sacraments, homiletic—”

José interrupted, “What’s that last thing, Father? I was followin’ you pretty good until then...”

“You mean, ‘homiletics?’”

José nodded.

“It means training to give homilies.”

“OK, Father, I get it,” said José, looking away.

“José, you look doubtful. What are you concerned about?”

“I never did too good at school, Father.”

“How far did you get, José?”

“I had to leave school in tenth grade in Mexico to help on the farm. I told myself I’d go back but I never could.”

What chance does this poor guy have of succeeding as a deacon? How could he get through the classes and the essays?

“José, I think the class work would be tough, very tough. Many deacon candidates have college and graduate degrees.”

José’s face was downcast.

“In addition, José, there are other criteria to enter the diaconate program. Are you aware of them?”

José grinned and his face lit up. “They probly want me to go to Mass every week, right? Just kiddin’, Father.”

“I see you at Mass and Communion all the time, José. Tell me a little bit about your family,” said the priest. “I know that you have done excellent work at the parish, so I have no worries about your work history.”

José looked at his hands, then said quietly, “Me and Rosita get along good. We do argue sometimes, but always peaceful!” He held his hands out reassuringly.

“Are you OK financially? I know we don’t pay our employees very much,” said the priest.

“Yes, Father, we manage. Rosita works as a cashier at the Giant four days a week, and our kids are in school full time now.”

“I’m curious, José. Why did your friends tell you that you should be a deacon?”

“They say somethin’ about people looking up to me. We’re part of a prayer group and sometime they help at a food pantry where I volunteer. Oh, yeah, Father, I just remembered that I coach their boys in soccer.”

“How do you manage to do all those things, José?”

“You know, Father, I no worry...sorry, I don’t worry too much about that. I do what I can to help people and God helps me. If I’m too tired, sometimes Rosita fills in for me at the pantry.”

The priest said, “You have a strong faith, José. Do you think God wants you to be a deacon?”

“Good question, Father. I think God gave me the idea of talking to you about it.”

I wonder how he’d be in front of the congregation.

“José, I’m wondering, have you considered lecturing at Mass?”

“Father, I’ve thought about it, but maybe my English ain’t... sorry, isn’t good enough. I do read the Gospel sometimes at our prayer group but that’s in Spanish. Father, maybe I could practice wit’ somebody?” he asked.

“I’m sure we could find someone you could practice with,” said Fr. George. “I know that in the seminary, your teachers will ask you to write reflections on your faith. Do you think you could?”

José said, “I’m not much for writing, Father. Sometimes I give a little story at the prayer group. I wrote one last week about my boy, Carlos. About how me and Rosita tried to persuade him to come

to Church wit' us when he was in kindergarten. Now he comes on his own. Is that what you mean by reflectin' on my faith, Father?"

"Yes, that's the idea. Tell me, how did the others react to your story?"

"It's funny, Father, but my story got them talkin' for an hour about our kids and Mass. Some of the older kids, you know, lose interest when they're in high school. We all worry about that in our families."

"José, it's a big problem in our parishes." Fr. George paused, then continued. "Even if you decide the studies would be too difficult, I would like you to be a part of our youth ministry here. It sounds to me like you are a good storyteller and that people respond to your stories. I bet the kids here would love to hear them. Jesus was a wonderful storyteller too, you know."

José sat up straighter and his voice became more confident. "You know, Father, you been talkin' about how hard the studies are and I believe you. But what about them ... I mean, those fishermen, the Apostles. They dint have much book learnin' neither, but they were good enough for Jesus!"

"Great point, José!" said Fr. George. *I'm impressed. José still seems enthusiastic.* "Give me a moment. I want to check something that will interest you."

The priest went upstairs and came back down with his computer. He pressed a few keys while José waited in suspense.

"José, I just looked at the archdiocesan website. It's an amazing coincidence, but next Monday evening, there will be an information night for people interested in the diaconate. And guess what? It's right here in the parish hall at 7 p.m. You could bring Rosita."

José felt his heart thumping in his chest. "Father, maybe no coincidence; maybe God's sending me 'nother message. How 'bout if we bring some pizza to the rectory next Monday at six? We could share it wit' you, then we go to the meeting."

Fr. George smiled and shook José's hand. "It's a deal. My cook gets the night off. See you both then."



Strong Wine

(1 Cor 2:2–5)

MARSHA HAUSER

St. Faustina Writing Group

Jess paused in front of the dingy mirror that hung inside the waitress station at the Surf and Turf restaurant. *Dang, I should've taken the time to wash my hair! I wonder if this'll affect tonight's tips? Meh, can't do anything about it now,* she thought as she turned to find Louise, her trainer.

“Your second week, right?” Louise looked up from a stack of napkins that she was rolling around tableware. “This'll be an experience for you. Thursday nights get pretty brisk with the college students, so you'll have to move fast!”

Jess's nervous nod indicated she understood Louise's comment, and she joined in the never-ending task of prepping tableware. She'd learned that Louise was fair but demanding. Jess was a little afraid of her.

“Got your gear?”

Jess patted the apron she'd just tied around her waist. Feeling the weight in her pocket of the machine she used to submit orders and bill customers, she pretended courage by straightening her spine. “I do,” Jess answered.

She glanced toward the restaurant entrance and saw a line forming at the hostess's station. The tables were starting to fill.

Within seconds the hostess sped through the station, calling out, “Who’s up? Table two’s waiting.”

“Our newbie,” replied Louise. Turning to Jess, she said, “There’s doubles on drinks until six. That’s why those kids are coming in so early. Make sure they’re legal. You serve somebody underage, you’re out the door. Table two!”

Jess’s stomach tightened. Inhaling deeply, and avoiding her reflection in the mirror, she headed toward the table of customers.

“Hi, my name’s Jess. What can I get you?” she asked three young women at her assigned table. Her hand holding the machine shook a little as she scanned the coeds. Their hair was swept up into stylish ’dos, and their makeup, midriff-baring tops, and tight jeans betrayed plans for a fun night on the town. She could never put together a look like that. They turned to look at her with haughty expressions that made her knees weak. She always felt like less among women like this, and her confidence took another hit when she thought, *They’re probably not legal.*

“I’ll have a pinot,” answered the redheaded leader of the trio, drumming expensively manicured nails on the table.

“Pinot noir or grigio?” asked Jess, relieved that she’d remembered there were *two* kinds of pinot. She was pretty sure she’d pronounced them correctly too.

Caught off guard, the redhead stared at Jess. With a toss of her hair, she replied dismissively, “Noir.”

“May I see your ID, please?” asked Jess.

“You’re kidding,” said the redhead. “I find that a little offensive.”

“I need to see your ID,” Jess repeated.

The rude woman’s companions began rummaging through their bags, retrieving the proofs of identity they knew they’d be asked to produce. The redhead, though, stared defiantly at Jess.

“I’ll have a merlot,” one of her companions said, distinctly pronouncing the ‘t’ at the end of the word ‘merlot.’

“Me too,” said the third woman. They offered IDs to Jess.

Jess scanned the cards with skepticism. The young women didn't look twenty-one, but what did she know about IDs, fake or not? *Should I run these by Louise?* she wondered. Turning back to the redhead, she asked, "Your ID, please?"

A look of resolve passed over the young woman's contemptuous face. "Look, I don't have an ID, and if I did, I don't think I'd show it to you. Just get me the pinot, okay? The pinot *noir*," she said with emphasis.

For a second, Jess was dumbfounded by the redhead's blatant disrespect. *Do I make a scene?* she wondered. *She sees that I'm afraid of her, and she's enjoying it.* Jess cleared her throat, then mumbled, "Excuse me."

The waitress station was a blur of activity as waiters hurried to fill guests' requests. Across the dining room, Jess saw Louise setting a booster seat in place and arranging crayons and coloring sheets in front of toddlers as she worked with a large family. *I better not bother her*, Jess thought.

Relying on routine to steady her, Jess filled water glasses for the three women. Her right hand trembled slightly as she moved the glasses onto a serving tray. *I'm on my own here*, she told herself. *I've got to solve this myself.* Her heart sank at the thought of returning to the table. Then she remembered her Aunt Shelley, who taught her, "The world will try to make you compromise, but don't give in. Do what's right." *Do what's right*, she thought. Her hand stopped shaking, and her spine straightened as she lifted the tray.

Back at the table, she placed a glass of water before each woman.

"I'll need to see that ID, please," Jess reminded the redhead.

"And I told you I don't have one," said the woman.

Taking a deep breath, Jess replied, "Then I can't serve you the wine. Is there something else you'd like instead?"

The redhead stared at Jess. A flash of uneasiness passed over her eyes, and she hesitated.

“The water is fine,” she replied, smoothing the tablecloth with her hands. Her friends, keeping their eyes on the table, nodded in agreement. Jess took another deep breath.

“Here are your IDs,” she said as she placed the cards in front of the other women. “Are you ready to order?”

“We’ll need a minute,” said one of the friends, glancing nervously at the redhead.

“Okay. I’ll check back,” said Jess, and she returned to the waitress station.

“What happened with table two?” Jess turned to see Louise by her side.

“They ordered wine, but one of them refused to give me an ID. I’m pretty sure the cards from the other two are fake. They’re sticking with water. Wow! What an attitude the redhead gave me.”

“So you stood up to them. That took some guts,” Louise nodded as she gave Jess a look of respect.

“I was scared,” admitted Jess. “I didn’t want them to cost me my job, but I don’t like liars either.”

“Yeah. I hear you. Wait a second, what’s going on?” Louise was looking toward the table, where the redhead was angrily standing up. “You better check on them,” she said to Jess.

As Jess approached the table, the redhead rushed out of the restaurant. The two remaining women stood to follow her, but one turned back to Jess, her fist clutching a wad of bills. She handed the cash to Jess, whispered, “I’m sorry, this is for your trouble,” and followed her friends out of the restaurant.



We'll Meet on the Other Shore

(Acts 9:36-42)

JENNIFER TAN

St. Thomas More and St. Francis de Sales Writing Groups

“Sarah!” Her mother called as the twelve-year-old entered the house. She had just come back from her sewing class. “Can you please bring this walnut-raisin bread to Tabitha? She loves it, and I hope it’ll cheer her up a bit.” Tabitha, who lived three rows away, had been ill.

“Certainly, Mama. And I can show Aunt Tabitha the shawl I finished making at class today.”

“Well, do hurry before it rains.”

“Yes, Mama.” Sarah took the basket of bread her mother had prepared and with her sewing bag still slung over her shoulder, went out again onto the streets of Joppa.

Almost everyone in their community knew Tabitha. She sewed beautifully and often gave away tunics and other clothing she made to widows, like Sarah’s mother. Besides the clothing, Sarah and the other children loved her for the stories she told, the songs she taught them, and the food she cooked. Tabitha used to babysit them when their mothers had to be away. The past week, she had been homebound due to fever and a cold.

Sarah hurried down the lane to the left of their house, glad to be seeing Tabitha, but also anxious. She had visited only two days ago with her mother. Tabitha could hardly talk and was so pale

and thin that Sarah almost couldn't recognize her. The dark clouds gathering above seemed to read Sarah's thoughts as they cast a gloom over the neighborhood.

After turning at the corner, Sarah almost bumped into a crowd around a peddler woman sitting by the roadside. On display were shawls with the most interesting motifs and pictures she'd ever seen. The warm fabric prompted her to consider getting one for Tabitha. A glance at the prices made her hopeful of buying one. After some time, she saw one depicting a deer by the river. *That's Aunt Tabitha's name in picture!*

Sarah had just enough money to pay for it. Her joy was short-lived, though, as she felt a big raindrop while she tucked the new shawl into her bag.

Suddenly, it began to pour. Sarah ran home instinctively. She got wet, but fortunately, the basket lid kept the bread dry. Her mother was dismayed upon learning what had happened.

"Well, Sarah, you shouldn't have stopped. Tabitha makes the most beautiful shawls herself. It's the bread that she won't be able to get."

"I'm sorry, Mama. I couldn't help admiring the shawls. And they're comfortable. I didn't expect it to rain so soon."

"Well, we don't know when it'll stop raining now. You'd better dry yourself before you catch a cold. You can bring the bread tomorrow."

The next morning, Sarah was about to take the bread to Tabitha when her mother came in the front door.

"You don't have to bring the bread anymore, dear. We're going there together shortly."

"Why, Mama?"

"Tabitha has passed away . . . last night."

Sarah felt a lump in her throat. *I would've seen Aunt Tabitha for the last time! The bread would've been a fitting farewell gift . . . the shawl . . . it's all in vain now.*

Her mother was equally shaken, but she gave Sarah a hug before they set off in silence.

When they reached Tabitha's house, it was already packed, but visitors were still arriving. Tabitha's children and their families looked rather lost, as were most of the neighbors present. Some were sobbing uncontrollably; some were teary-eyed; others looked solemn. Sarah tried hard to remain composed. She sat with her friends while the grown-ups helped in whatever way they could. The younger children played among themselves amid hushes. Several people calmly went about getting Tabitha's body ready while others were preparing for prayers.

Tabitha belonged to the newly established church of Jesus Christ in Joppa. She'd often hosted the disciples, called saints, for fellowship, discussions on the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, and prayers. Tabitha would also teach the children about the faith through songs and stories. Now, at her sudden death, the saints' support and presence comforted her family.

After they had washed Tabitha, they laid her in a room upstairs. At midday, two of the saints brought a stranger into the room. The praying congregation's voices dropped as they surveyed the dark and weather-beaten man. Except for his simple tunic and resolute demeanor, he looked like many of the sailors in Joppa.

One of the saints addressed them: "Brothers and sisters, this is Peter, whom Jesus Christ had appointed as leader of the Church. He was in Lydda and has kindly come at our urgent request to pray over Tabitha."

The congregation began to whisper among themselves. Some nodded reverently at Peter. The widows went to his side, tearfully showing him the tunics and other clothing Tabitha had made for them. "We can't believe that she has left us; she'd been such a great blessing," they said.

Peter appeared moved. Gently, he ushered all of them out. They waited for what seemed like ages, not knowing what to expect.

Finally, Peter opened the door and called them. Walking out slowly, with Peter holding her hand, was Tabitha—alive!

Sarah couldn't believe her eyes. The people were bewildered.

"Tabitha!"

"Aunt Tabitha!"

Then, the women and children rushed to hug her. The saints started praising God. They thanked Peter profusely, but he said, "My friends, it was Jesus who gave back Tabitha's life. I merely prayed in his name for God's mercy upon her and all of you. The Lord has restored her life, so that you may believe that Jesus is the risen Christ and be saved."

Suddenly, Sarah understood the resurrection rhyme that Tabitha had taught them. She started singing:

"Death is our final farewell no more,
For the risen Christ has for us restored
Life with him in heav'n forevermore—
We'll all be meeting on the other shore!"

Soon, everyone was singing along. The news spread throughout Joppa; many more came to believe in the Lord. As for Sarah, she was grateful for the unexpected second chance to gift Tabitha the shawl, which delighted Tabitha immensely.

Twelve years later, Sarah got married and moved to Thessalonica. She accompanied and kept a lookout for her elderly mother-in-law, since her husband had to travel often. Communication with her mother and Tabitha was through letters and parcels, which were infrequent due to the long distance.

One day, Sarah's mother-in-law brought in a parcel for Sarah. As always, she opened it joyfully. This time, though, her face fell on beholding the shawl she'd given to Tabitha. For some time, she held it close to her heart, her head bowed.

"Sarah?"

She started. "Yes, Mother?"

"What's the matter?"

“This shawl I gave to Aunt Tabitha . . . it has come.” Sarah held it up before her mother-in-law, who didn’t know about it, though she’d heard about the miracle. Her mother-in-law’s expression changed. She moved closer and inspected the shawl’s right-hand corner.

“How did you get this, Sarah?”

Sarah narrated the whole story. “The miracle seemed to me like the resurrection of the body at the end of time,” she concluded.

Both of them fell silent, each lost in her own thoughts.

Finally, her mother-in-law said, “Why has the shawl come?”

“Before I came here with Daniel after our wedding, Aunt Tabitha said she’d get it sent to me . . . we knew that I wouldn’t make it to her deathbed.”

Her mother-in-law hobbled to a chair and sat down.

“So, you’ll be going back to mourn as our custom requires.”

“I can’t leave you alone here, Mother. Also, the mourning period would’ve been over. I’ll pray for Aunt Tabitha’s soul here and send a condolence letter.”

“But won’t you regret it later? Also, whatever would others think?” She wasn’t a believer; the faith of Jesus Christ had just reached Thessalonica then.

“You’ve more need of me here, Mother. I will stay, especially since Daniel is sailing.”

“You know, Sarah, why I asked about the shawl? . . . The deer by the river . . . my best friend stitched it. I’ve just realized that I was the peddler you bought it from.”

Sarah’s eyes widened. She hadn’t remembered what the peddler looked like.

“I followed my husband on his trip to Joppa then. My friend passed me her shawls to sell for her. She stitched beautiful, unique pictures on them . . . I’d usually recognize them straightaway, like this one. The little rose at this corner, her signature, confirmed my suspicion just now.

“While I was away, she died in an accident. I’ve always regretted not being able to mourn her death properly; it was all over when I came back . . . I don’t want that for you.”

Sarah knelt beside her.

“God knows our hearts, Mother. And Jesus has promised eternal life at the end of time. He thus invites us to meet Aunt Tabitha, your friend . . . all who died before us . . . again.”

She smiled softly.

“We’ll meet them on the other shore.”



Bridget Fawcett's Confession

(2 Cor 5:17–20)

HELENA TURNER

St. Gertrude the Great Writing Group

Bridget walked through the thick fog toward the old church and quietly slipped through the giant double doors. She dipped her fingers in the holy water, made the sign of the cross, entered the nearest pew, and kneeled to pray. She was miserable. Exhausted from weeks of anger, rumination, and bad dreams. Her left hand clutched a crumpled piece of paper.

She closed her eyes. Lord, please help me, she prayed silently. I'm confused, and I don't know what to do. But the memories surged up, interrupted her prayer, and hijacked her thoughts. She paused, tried again, and failed again. Bridget opened her eyes and tried to relax her clenched up body. "Lord, please help me," she whispered, and stood up.

She walked across the church and joined the line of people waiting for the priest to hear their confessions. She opened the crumpled piece of paper. *Nurturing imaginary angry conversations. Harboring resentment and grudges. Failing to forgive.* The memories flashed again. Bridget shoved the paper into her purse. She fixed her eyes on the ribbon of warm light at the bottom of the confessional door and waited.

When her turn came, she opened the door, went inside, and lowered herself onto the kneeler. The door slowly closed behind her.

The dark wood and soft light inside the tiny confessional felt safe and comforting.

“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” said a gentle voice on the other side of the partition. She recognized the voice belonging to Fr. Cleary and relaxed a little. “Amen,” she said. And then, “Bless me father, for I have sinned. It’s been two months since my last confession.”

“Go ahead,” he said. Bridget could see the faint outline of his head on the other side of the grille.

“I’ve been having angry thoughts,” Bridget said, choking up a little. “Imagining ways to punish someone for hurting me. I don’t want revenge, but the thoughts keep coming anyway. I can’t pray anymore, and my mind is out of control.” She paused. “I am sorry for these and all of my sins.”

“And what is happening in your life right now?” Fr. Cleary asked. “That you find yourself in this situation?”

“My manager was gossiping and lying about me to the other managers. She said I was late on my projects, and that I made mistakes and was unreliable. Things like that,” she replied.

“And was there any truth in what she said?”

“No. Claudia is always jealous of someone. I got an award last year for my work on another project. That’s when it started. But I was just denied a promotion because of her.”

“I see,” said Fr. Cleary. “Is she still doing this to you?”

“No.” Bridget replied. “She’s doing it to someone else now.”

“All right.” He paused, and then said very gently, “Now, I have a question for you. Have you forgiven her?”

“No,” she said, suddenly defensive. “She got away with it. She’ll never be held accountable for what she did.”

“People get away with terrible things all the time.” Fr. Cleary said patiently. “We forgive them anyway. Remember Jesus on the cross. They crucified him and he asked God to forgive them because they didn’t know what they were doing. We always have to forgive.”

“But Father,” Bridget protested, confused. “She knew exactly what she was doing. It’s not the same.”

“It is the same,” Fr. Cleary said firmly. “It’s exactly the same. And when you understand how it’s the same, you’ll be able to forgive, and the anger will end. You’re angry because you haven’t forgiven.”

“Ok.” Bridget relented. She wanted to cry.

Fr. Cleary sensed her confusion. “I know it’s hard,” he said, very gently. “But you have to make a choice. We all do. We choose the path of life, or we choose the path of death. There’s no other way. You want to stop being angry, right?”

“Yes,” Bridget said. “I do.”

“Okay good,” Fr. Cleary said. “Here, why don’t you try this and see if it helps?” He handed her a piece of paper.

Bridget took it and read the title: *Exercise for the Forgiveness of Others*.

“Ok,” she sighed. “I’ll try.”

“Good!” said Fr. Cleary. “That will be your penance.” Bridget said the closing prayer and Fr. Cleary prayed the words of absolution over her.

“Amen,” she said, “Thank you, Father.”

She stood up, left the confessional, and went back to the pew. She rubbed her neck and was relieved to discover that her body was beginning to relax. But then she read the paper and flinched. Claudia knew exactly what she was doing. How can someone know what they’re doing without knowing what they’re doing? It didn’t make sense. But when Bridget looked up at Jesus on the crucifix, suspended in midair above the altar, she remembered the words of a friend long ago, “How will you explain to Jesus that this was too hard?”

She resolved to do it. *Step #1: Imagine Jesus sitting beside you, and ask, “Lord, who do I need to forgive?”* Bridget closed her eyes and imagined Jesus sitting next to her and smiling at her. She felt safe and loved and happy beside him. I want this back, she thought. The way things were before Claudia.

Suddenly Claudia's face, smug and self-righteous, flew into view and pushed Jesus away. Bridget felt a surge of anger. She clutched the edge of the pew. Hatred forced her eyes open. She leaned back in frustration then, but reminded herself of Fr. Cleary's words: "You have to make a choice."

She sighed deeply and read, *Step #2: Reflect on the sins you confessed and the person connected to those wounds.* Bridget remembered the fantasies of punishing Claudia that she had secretly indulged. How she had dreamed of humiliating her and holding her publicly accountable. The hidden, vindictive thoughts that had brought Bridget both great satisfaction and deep shame. I'm becoming just like Claudia, she thought.

More motivated now, she moved to *Step #3: Now, imagine that the person you have chosen to forgive is sitting between you and Jesus.* Bridget closed her eyes and imagined Claudia sitting between them in the pew. Claudia was beautiful, stylish, and impeccably dressed. She imagined Claudia realizing that she was sitting next to Jesus, and, true to character, Claudia began to fawn over him exuberantly. Bridget's stomach turned in disgust.

I just want to get this over, she thought. *Step #4: Feel the pain of how this person hurt you and share that pain with Jesus.* Desperate, something deep inside Bridget released. She closed her eyes and poured everything out. She told Jesus that Claudia had bullied her through tiny, insidious lies. That she had twisted the truth to make Bridget appear stupid and unreliable. That Claudia was jealous and selfish and out of control. Bridget vented her anger, shame, and sadness onto Jesus until there was nothing left.

Jesus listened patiently and nodded at Bridget with a look of compassion and understanding. He sees it, she realized. He sees what's been happening. She felt so much better. But next to Jesus, Claudia's face was contorted.

"You're lying," Claudia lashed out at Bridget. "Stop lying!" Bridget leaned back and away from Claudia.

Claudia looked at Jesus, outraged. “She’s lying! She’s assassinating my character!” She was shrieking and pointing her finger at Bridget. Jesus was looking at Claudia now. He appeared to be listening to her very carefully.

“This isn’t true!” Claudia tried again, looking at Jesus in desperation. Claudia began to cry. Bridget didn’t move. Jesus was looking at Claudia with the same compassion and understanding as he’d had toward Bridget, but it was having a wildly different effect on Claudia. The more he understood, the more distraught Claudia became.

Bridget opened her eyes, stunned. She had not expected this. *Step #5: Now imagine Jesus forgiving this person for their sins.* Jesus looked at Claudia and said, “Father, forgive Claudia. She didn’t know what she was doing.” Claudia stared at Jesus, frozen in shock and fear.

Jesus turned to Bridget and nodded toward the paper in her hand. She looked down and read, *Step #6: Look at the person you have chosen to forgive and say: “In the name of Jesus, I forgive you, _____.”* Bridget inhaled and closed her eyes one more time. She turned toward Claudia.

“In the name of Jesus, I forgive you, Claudia,” she said. Bridget’s anger vanished. The tension in her body released, and she leaned back against the pew, surprised. Her skin was warm and tingling. She paused and then said it again. She felt more relief. She kept repeating the words until she noticed the gradual return of the peace that she had been missing for weeks.

When she was done, Bridget looked at Jesus. He was smiling at them both. A halo of warm light surrounded him, and the light was moving toward Claudia, who was now shivering violently. The light enveloped Claudia, and slowly she disappeared. Jesus smiled at Bridget one more time, and then he disappeared too.

Bridget opened her eyes. The fog outside had lifted. She looked up and saw golden rivers of light pouring through the windows

high above, and the angels painted on the ceiling were twirling and swirling and dancing in it.



The Face of Beauty

(Jas 2:1-5)

ERIKA M. WALKER

St. Gregory the Great and St. Gertrude Writing Groups

“Princess Sharon?” The nervous voice of Sharon’s maidservants startled her awake. Sharon groaned, “What is it now?”

“Today is . . . well it’s . . . the Royal Charity Ball is tonight!”

Sharon sat up at once, as her heart jumped into high gear. Her first real ball!

Images of dancing played in her imagination all day, and she stifled a shout of joy when the first fancy carriage arrived. Lords and ladies dressed in their finest soon made a grand procession. Sharon stuck up her nose and smiled; none wore anything as lavish as her dress. She went to admire her dress again. The exquisite shade of purple was the rarest of hues. She traced a shimmering pearl flower and studied the intricate lace work.

A knock came, and several maids entered. A flurry of action ensued, and the dress was whisked onto Sharon. Before she had time to catch her breath, she was rushed down the hall toward the ballroom to be presented before the kingdom.

A striking male attendant met her at the door and took her arm. Her brother was being announced, and she heard the applause from behind the doors.

She squinted as the doors cracked open, filling the hallway with an unnaturally bright light. The attendant led her forward, and she

tried to smile as her name was called out. The light bounced off the pearls and gems on her dress, sending rainbows dancing into the crowd. Dazzled by the lights, the crowd sounded pleased, but once she reached the banister the sounds abruptly changed.

Many gasped, while others cried out, "What's wrong with her?"

Nobody clapped. Sharon felt beads of sweat running down her lower back and legs, everything started to sound far away, and black spots began to swim into her vision. In all the excitement, she had almost forgotten her birthmark! Now, the large patch of discolored flesh covering the left side of her face grew hot, and she instinctively hid her face in her hands. The attendant whisked her away to a dark corner. As she caught her breath, the cheering resumed when her younger sister entered the room.

As the pounding in her head subsided, tears began to flow freely. She was left alone, and all eyes were glued to the royal family, her family. She stumbled out a back door and ran. The dark disoriented her, but when she heard the sound of the horses snorting, she stopped.

Manure came flying out of the stable window, almost hitting her.

"Hey, watch it!" she cried out.

"What's that?" came a man's voice, "Is someone there? Don't mind me. Just cleaning the stalls."

Her heartbeat slowed at once at the mention of cleaning. Cleaning was her secret joy. She couldn't fix her face, but she could fix her environment.

"It's just me, Sharon," she said.

"Ah, princess! Shouldn't you be at the ball?" the man asked.

"All of the people there are cruel, and it was boring anyway," she lied.

"I wonder what a princess is supposed to do anyhow?" the voice said.

Sharon considered that. She looked down at her sparkling gown. She had lived for the moment of being shown off like some kind of animal at a fair.

“Look at them stars, they was made to shine, wasn’t they? Are you a star?” The man stopped talking, and more manure flung out the window.

After what seemed like a long while, she admitted quietly, “No . . . I’m a princess.”

He poked his head out from around the corner, and Sharon gasped. He was only a young boy, but his voice sounded much older.

He grinned at her, “Go be one then.” He ducked back behind the wall.

Somehow, his words made her stop worrying about the birthmark, and she walked back to the castle with a newfound sense of dignity. Maybe she could do so much more than stand still and try to look pretty.

The next morning, her mother came to wake her. “I’m dreadfully sorry about last night, dear. Of course you may remain in your room forever. We will see to all of your needs.”

“Mother, I think the people need to see me more often, not less. I wonder if there is anything I can do for the people?”

The Queen opened her mouth, but shut it without a sound. She lifted a finger but dropped it again, unsure of what to say. “Let me talk to your father,” she said, and left the room.

That evening, the King slammed his goblet down in the middle of supper, and scrutinized Sharon for several full minutes before saying, “So you want to serve the people of our kingdom, Sharon?”

Sharon glanced at her mother, who was sitting very straight and stiff. She refused to make eye contact. Sharon managed a slight nod.

The King grinned, “I think it’s a fine idea! You two could learn something from your sister,” he said to her siblings. “I’ll make all the arrangements; you have my blessing to go out whenever it suits you.”

“Thank you so much, Father,” she managed to say.

As Sharon got dressed the next morning, she imagined taunts and cruel stares. She nearly lost heart when a maid handed her a

basket of bread, “Madam Baker heard word of your plan and sent these up.”

With a strengthened resolve, she headed out the doors and over the bridge.

The market was crowded; men and women called out loudly announcing their wares. Children yelled and ran with wild abandon, nearly crashing into her. Strange smells of foods she had never seen before came in an odd mixture that nearly made her gag. She started to sway, and her knight rushed to catch her, but she shook her head and steadied herself.

Awkwardly, she held out loaves of bread to everyone she passed by. Children snatched them out of her hands, while a woman in a fancy dress raised an eyebrow and brushed past her.

To her relief, the stares and name-calling she had feared were absent. *These poor people*, she thought, as she noticed the man at the fish stall who wore an eye patch, and more than one person who limped along with a crutch. Beggars sat in filthy corners, their clothing often torn or hanging limply.

“What’s *that*, Mommy?” an innocent little boy’s voice cried out.

Sharon stopped; time seemed to slow down, and suddenly all eyes were on her.

“*That*, that on her face, Mommy! See!” the boy insisted.

Sharon turned, and saw a frantic mother attempting to stop her two-year-old from pointing. She picked him up, and rushed away as he thrashed, still screaming, “That, that, that!”

Sharon couldn’t move; her eyes narrowed, and her teeth clenched. Once the sound of the little boy faded away, she noticed the quiet. It was clear that everyone in her vicinity recognized her despite her common garb.

She swallowed hard, unsure of what to do. She managed a forced grin, and suddenly, in spite of herself, she began to giggle until a full belly laugh burst forth. It seemed as if everyone’s collective breath was released, and laughter rang out all around. Then the market life

resumed once more. Sharon sighed, relieved to find that the initial knot of anger in her gut was gone.

From then on, every day was much the same story, and before she knew it a whole year had gone by. Some ran to greet her whenever she arrived, but others scoffed or spat. She always ran out of bread before every mouth was fed, and more often than not returned home too exhausted to be happy.

One night she just couldn't sleep. Were her efforts even making a dent in the atrocious levels of poverty? She made her way back to the stable: "Is the stable boy here?"

"Boy? What boy?" an old man asked.

Disappointed, she turned away.

As she headed home, a charming sound of a little pipe roused her from her ruminations, and she spotted the boy. He was seated in a nook in the castle wall. He stopped playing when he spotted her, and grinned, beckoning her over.

He stared at the sky for a moment then locked eyes on hers: "My princess, you're not afraid of yerself anymore! That's good. But yah need to let *them* teach *you*."

Confused, Sharon started to ask what he meant, but before she could object, he jumped from the wall into the tall grass below, and disappeared.

Teach me? Teach me what? She played the words over and over but remained puzzled.

The next day she left the bread behind and went out to the market in disguise. She watched a little girl chase a butterfly. Then she noticed for the first time that the one-eyed fish dealer gave out bundles to every beggar, and they joked with each other like old friends. A boy rushed to help an old woman when she lost her footing and dropped a bag of fruit.

That night she lay awake in bed again, but she felt different. *Is this what happiness feels like?* She wondered. Suddenly she couldn't stop grinning as the scenes of the day replayed in her mind. Before,

she thought she had to single-handedly save these poor people from their unfortunate lives, but now she realized maybe they didn't need saving after all . . . maybe she did.



Where There Is Good

(1 Pet 3:15)

MAURA MANKTELOW SWEENEY

St. Anselm and St. Clare of Assisi Writing Groups

Sheridan checked her watch and groaned internally as she hurried down the quiet hall of the administration wing. Ordinarily she liked these meetings with her mentor Jeanne, whose experience and encouragement had been reassuring throughout her nurse practitioner training. But these last few days had been harrowing, and she wasn't sure she was ready to discuss them.

As she entered, she found Jeanne sitting in one of the rocking chairs near the window, framed by a stunning sunset. Jeanne welcomed her warmly and reached over to pat the opposite chair. "Come, sit down. I hear it has been quite challenging down on the maternity ward lately. Would you like to take a few minutes to catch your breath before we begin?"

"Yes. Please."

As Sheridan tried to make herself comfortable, she noticed that Jeanne had sat back in her chair and closed her eyes. She wondered if that was part of Jeanne's secret for handling the difficulties of her work. By contrast, Sheridan felt overwhelmed and didn't know how to put her thoughts in order. What she really wanted to do was cry. But no time for that, right?

After what she assumed was way too much silence, Sheridan cleared her throat. Jeanne opened her eyes and leaned forward,

peering at her with concern. “Tell me about the good you saw unfolding before you today.”

The question dumbfounded Sheridan, who thought Jeanne would be more sensitive after acknowledging the rumors of what had been happening. She blurted out, “Today we had to sign two death certificates, and I can’t help thinking everyone involved would have been better off if those women had never gotten pregnant.”

“Why don’t you tell me a bit more about each case and why you feel that way?”

Sheridan let her pain and frustration gush out. “There was a mother of six who came in from their homestead with her husband and all the kids in tow yesterday. She’d stopped feeling movement a few days ago. After testing we determined the fetus had died and she needed to be induced. That was long and hard for her. She finally delivered early this afternoon, but that was a lot of labor for no life.

“Then there was a girl who’s been living on the streets who had zero prenatal care. She claimed that she didn’t even know she was pregnant, though she appeared to be around 36 weeks. We confirmed her pregnancy and that she was in labor. The delivery went quickly enough, but the baby had anencephaly and died.”

“Those sound like difficult circumstances for both families,” acknowledged Jeanne, “but you didn’t tell me about the good you saw.”

“What good could there have been in either situation,” shot back Sheridan. “Wouldn’t it have been better if neither child had been conceived?”

Jeanne closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Sheridan thought perhaps Jeanne was counting to ten like her mother would when they argued. She knew that her outburst was contradictory to the values of this hospital, where a cross hung over every door and women like Jeanne had once been addressed formally as “Sister.”

When Jeanne spoke it was to calmly ask, “What happened after each birth?”

Sheridan thought for a few minutes. What had happened? Her first impulse after doing the best they could to make the mothers comfortable had been to search for someone or something to blame for the painful events. After all, wasn't their job as healers to prevent pain? She looked back now, beyond the pain and grief, to consider the actions of the others in each room.

"Well, the dad of the large family had been with his wife most of the time. His mother had come to take care of the children. When the fetus was delivered, they brought all those children in to see. The children wanted to know if it was a boy or a girl and what name their parents had chosen."

"What name did they give their child?" asked Jeanne.

"Clement. They said it was because he was an innocent."

Jeanne nodded, "How did the family seem?"

"They were sad of course. There were lots of tears." Sheridan paused as if surprised by her next thought, "But they seemed to be accepting too. They wrapped him in a blanket the grandmother had just finished knitting, and everyone took turns holding the baby before the staff brought him down to the morgue."

"And what about the other delivery, Sheridan?"

She sighed. "That one was even harder. When that girl arrived, it was clear she didn't want anything to do with a baby. She asked to speak to the social worker practically the moment her pregnancy was confirmed. She wanted them to help place the baby for adoption because she felt a child wouldn't fit into her life. The delivery went relatively smoothly, but we knew as soon as the baby was born that she wouldn't need to worry about arranging a placement.

"As usual, we asked if she wanted to see the baby. Truthfully, I was shocked she said yes. It might have been easier if she hadn't. We had to explain what anencephaly was and that the baby wasn't going to live. I guess I should give her credit though. She stepped up. She wanted the baby baptized, and named the child Sojourner. Then she insisted on cuddling her daughter until she died. Afterwards she

asked to see the social worker again. I hope she wants help getting off the streets, but with cases like that, who knows.”

Jeanne sat back and gazed at the picture on the opposite wall, a peaceful meadow with sparrows soaring above it. Sheridan had once been curious why that had pride of place instead of framed diplomas like those that graced the other offices on this floor. However, today she was more concerned about the question she suspected would be coming after her earlier outburst.

Jeanne asked it without judgment: “Do you really think it would have been better if those babies had never been conceived?”

“I don’t know. I guess it depends on your perspective. On one hand, there would have been no pain and no heartache . . .” then she drifted into silence.

“But on the other hand, no love,” murmured Jeanne.

After an awkward moment, Jeanne seemed to make a decision. She looked Sheridan in the eye and asked, “May I share something personal?”

“Sure . . . I guess.”

“Almost thirty years ago, my sister’s youngest child was born with Down syndrome and a serious heart defect. It was evident that she would die without surgery, but the surgery was new and experimental, so there were no guarantees of success. After a lot of prayer, my sister and her husband decided to go ahead. It meant going back and forth from their small town into the city an hour away to visit Vivian every day at the hospital while trying to juggle work and their older children’s schedules. Vivian had the surgery and was able to go home, but within just a few months, her little heart gave out, and she died.

“Some people whispered, ‘It would have been better if she hadn’t been born.’ My sister believes Vivian’s life was full of love and purpose.

“A few years ago, a girl who went to school with one of my nieces adopted a baby who had the exact same diagnosis. The only

difference was that little Sophie's surgery was a success. I have to believe that what doctors learned from surgeries like my niece's so long ago led to Sophie thriving now."

Jeanne paused before continuing, "Sheridan, I want you to know that it isn't unusual to ask these questions. When I was a student and first struggling with questions like yours, one of our older Sisters gave me that painting and wrote a quote into the grass at the bottom of the picture as a reminder to me. It says, 'Not a sparrow is forgotten in God's sight . . . you are of more value than many sparrows.' Sr. Mary Elizabeth believed that the saying didn't just apply to us but to all of our patients, regardless of their diagnosis. I have come to agree with her.

"When I look at that picture, I am reminded that our profession calls me to care for others with the same love with which I am cared for, even when it seems like I am not making a difference."

They lapsed into contemplative silence. Jeanne reflected on the mystery of how her life had been blessed by all those she'd cared for through the years, while Sheridan wondered what her future might be like if she dared to care for patients with Jeanne's kind of love.

Finally, Jeanne broke the silence. "You must be exhausted after the last few days. I suspect you'd be better served by getting some rest than by listening to me. Feel free to stop back next week if there is anything else you want to talk through."

Sheridan rose and thanked Jeanne for understanding. As she left, she heard Jeanne's gentle reminder, "Keep looking for the good unfolding before you. That's where you will find hope."



All Things New

(Rev 21:5)

MICHELE COHEN

St. Thomas More Writing Group

Among the many reasons our short marriage failed were Neil's accusations that I used my so-called novel (his words) as a way to escape reality.

"You're always miles away, lost in the past, avoiding intimacy," Neil said.

"That's a little harsh," I argued. "It would be nice to have your support."

"I can't turn down this promotion, Janet. Come with me to California. We can start over."

"Leave Corning? Not now. I'm trying to get my mother to finally open up, so I can use it in my writing."

"Not likely," he said, and walked away.

We had to leave the house his company had provided. For a few weeks prior, I'd stashed money in sock drawers, shoeboxes, and empty coffee cans, enough to survive on for a year, since I was going to live in the Subaru Forester Neil happily relinquished. The idea of suffering for my art was appealing to me, and I spent the early spring days of 2002 reading, writing, walking barefoot through the wet sand on the shore of Lake Seneca, sleeping in my car, and finding creative ways to shower. I spent a lot of time thinking about

my mother, too. She'd never met Neil, and she didn't know I got married.

I never told her about the novel I was working on either, even when I saw her the Christmas before when we met at the Thompson Restaurant for dinner. She arrived first and sat hunched over the table strewn with empty sugar packets. Her old, baggy coat hung over the chair; her unkempt dark hair was streaked with grey.

"I didn't think you were coming!" She stood to hug me.

The odor of cat urine, which emanated from her clothes, brought back the flea infestation from when I was ten years old. I took a mental note to use this olfactory memory in my novel. The infestation had prompted a call to the exterminator, who came into the house. At the time, I was angry and confused; no friend or anyone had ever been allowed in before. It hadn't dawned on me until that moment how I had scorned Neil's requests to have friends over to watch football games or have his parents or colleagues over for dinner.

"Janet, did you hear me?" my mother said. "You are as pretty as ever. I tried calling you on your birthday last month—thirty is a big one—but I couldn't find your number. I'm always misplacing things.

"You'll have the buffet, right? And the chocolate pie you love."

The Thompson Restaurant was within walking distance of the house I grew up in and had been a refuge, the place where we ate every meal. My mother still ate every meal there, and during our Christmas dinner she was more interested in talking with the waitress who served us than in answering my not-so-subtle questions about her family.

When it was time to part, she asked, "When will I see you again?"

"Next Christmas?"

"Sure," and we agreed to start a new tradition.

After four months of living in my Forester, I made little progress with my novel and blamed it on my mother's reluctance to share. Doubt plagued me. Neil was right. I mulled this over, as the moon rose over Lake Seneca on a warm summer night, when I was inspired to write my mother a letter.

Dear Mom, it must be painful since you lost your parents young. Truthfully, I have this burning desire to know more about them, and I've been trying to write a novel, hoping it will help me understand myself, and you. Not knowing anything about my maternal or paternal history, I feel like a rudderless boat tossed by a tsunami. Love, Janet.

I checked my post box daily and had all but given up hope when, finally, at the end of September, I received a letter.

Dear Janet, it never occurred to me that you would be interested in us ordinary people with no heroic tales and little talent, wealth, or fame, but I'm sure I must have told you something. I couldn't find the paper or pens and was reluctant to write. Then I thought of the flood. You learned about it at school, as every child in Corning does.

In 1972, the summer between my junior and senior year in college, my father had a position at the Corning glass factory and was saving for a house. We—my parents, older brother, and I—lived in a first-floor apartment when Hurricane Agnes caused the Chemung River to overflow. I managed to escape to the rooftop, where I watched raging waters toss vehicles around like toys. I even saw a few caskets that I found out later were uprooted from cemeteries.

I never finished school. Love, Mom.

My heart broke as I read the letter handwritten in blue ink. I eagerly awaited the next letter, which came in late November:

Dear Janet, I'm trying to get better. I'm in the therapy and the support group at the church. They pray for me.

It's the little things: the gold carousel necklace my grandmother gave me, my Kiplings and Nancy Drews. The Bible with dates of family weddings, births, and deaths. My baby pictures.

I've been thinking about being with my father in the garden, when I was a young girl, before the flood, and I yearn to put my hands in the dirt again.

Until Christmas. Love, Mom.

But the blizzard of 2002 upset our Christmas day plans. I had secured a room at Motel 6 hours before travel became nearly impossible. The New Year brought a two-day snowstorm, record low temperatures, and the near depletion of my money. February brought more than twenty inches of snow and an historic ice storm. My teeth chattered and my tears froze, my fingers too cold to create.

I cherished my mother's letters and yearned for another one, which never came, but I was horrified at the thought of living with her again. Yet, on St. Valentine's Day, penniless and cold, I entered the dark, dank, and musty house I hadn't been in since I was seventeen. A cat meowed and rubbed up against my legs. I maneuvered the narrow paths between stacks of empty cat food tins, boxes, plastic containers, clothes, books, decorations, mail, and packing material to get to my childhood room, to put away the few things I brought with me.

My mother burst into tears as I opened the door. "I tried to clear the room for you, I swear. I even bought new curtains and a matching bedspread, with roses on them. Your favorite. But I didn't get far. I'm sorry." I'd never seen her so vulnerable.

"It's okay, Mom, really." I put my arm around her, "I'm sorry too. For not coming back, for not helping, for not telling you I eloped. He left me by the way." I expected condemnation, but she wanted to talk about all that had happened to me, and I did my best to share.

The next morning, I wrote Neil, "*You were right; the mysteries of love elude me. I'm trying.*"

Paula, my mother's support group leader, helped us to create a plan to remove one small pile of stuff a day, every day except Sunday.

“Maddy, you call me daily and continue to go to meetings. We’re praying and rooting for you. You’ve got a lot of support,” Paula said and glanced my way.

I postponed writing to help with the house. On Valentine’s Day the following year, the floors were clear and vacuumed, the shelves dusted. My mother found her wedding ring.

Over eggs, toast, and coffee one morning, my mother said, “After the flood, I volunteered with the cleanup crew over at the glass factory. I met your father sifting through mud trying to find shattered pieces of glass for restoration. But when he died while I was pregnant with you, my world unraveled. Again. But you are the blessing I took for granted.”

I discovered that my mother had learned how to cook from her grandmother. I’ll never forget the first meal we prepared. The roasted herb potatoes and homemade honey buns were superb. Poached salmon with hollandaise. She taught me the satisfaction of whisking clarified butter into deep yellow egg yolks and watching it froth into a thick, yellow cloud. We continued cooking together, trying new things. Occasionally a crust burnt, soup was oversalted, a pot was scorched, and a finger bled, but we wanted to share our meals with others.

“There’s still clutter,” Mom said, “And I can’t banish dust. The good dishes are misplaced, and I can’t find the pot I love.”

“It’s scary,” I said, “Maybe something small. We’ll invite Paula for soup and bread.”

We chopped vegetables and chicken. We shaped loaves. We set our everyday dishes on a freshly washed tablecloth. Classical music, wine poured.

When the doorbell rang, we stared at each other for a moment, wide-eyed. Mom took my hand to steady it as we opened the door.

“Come in.”



Hope of Gain

(Acts 16:16–19)

KATHARINE TARVAINEN

St. Gregory the Great and St. Bede Writing Groups

In the summer of 1920, a quiet young man arrived in the small New England town of Phillipsburg with a single suitcase and a pair of spectacles. The suitcase didn't hold much, and the eyes behind the glasses couldn't see much, but their deficiencies made them all the more precious to the man who possessed them.

As he walked from the train station to his boarding house, a group of children raced past, chattering and laughing with excitement. Looking after them, the young man saw that they were headed towards a field outside of town where a large tent was blooming from the sun-scorched grass like a candy-striped mushroom. The circus, it seemed, had also just arrived.

The Bandling Family Circus was run by Bobby and Bella Bandling, siblings, who, unlike their entertainments, rarely sparked delight in those who came to see them. Bobby claimed the spotlight as “Roberto” the Ringmaster, while Bella claimed the cash. Bella was particularly attentive to the revenue-rich sideshow acts, which included a sword-swallower, a bearded lady, and a snake charmer who had an equal, if not greater, skill at charming young ladies. The most popular attraction, however, was Seraphina the fortune teller.

When the circus opened that evening in Phillipsburg, the line outside of Seraphina's tent was much the same as it was in every

town: long and predominantly female. Young women sought the future, eager to see if their fates lay with longstanding sweethearts or handsome strangers, while widows and mothers sought the past, desperate to know if their beloved dead lay in peace among the poppies of Flanders.

One by one they entered the dimly-lit tent and met Seraphina, seated behind a table with a glowing glass orb. Despite the dark eyeliner and lipstick she wore, she was clearly quite young, which made it all the more shocking when she spoke, for her voice bore a deep, husky resonance entirely at odds with her small frame. As they emerged from the dark tent, the hopeful brides-to-be and the sorrowful brides-that-were blinked in the harsh glare of the artificial fairground lights, clinging to prophecies of future lovers and final wishes, willing them to be real.

During a quiet moment, Bella came bustling into Seraphina's tent, an anxious mother hen coming to check on her adopted golden egg.

"How are the spirits this evening, my pet?"

"Same as always," Seraphina sighed. When she wasn't sounding forth prophecy, her voice had a decidedly softer tone, much like any other sixteen-year-old. She reached to loosen the scarf wrapped about her head, but Bella stopped her.

"Please, Auntie Bella, I have the most awful headache . . ."

"It's just hot in here, my darling. Go out back and get some fresh air."

Outside the tent, the air was thick with humidity and mosquitoes. A limp breeze carried the slight tang of ocean brine, along with the sounds of laughter and the *oompah* of the organ from the big top. Within Seraphina's head, however, was the familiar buzz of discordant voices, like radio static. Night after night, as she sat in her tent, the voices would coalesce into prophetic transmissions which Seraphina then broadcast to her visitors.

Her head throbbed as the hum of voices increased their pitch. She felt drawn towards a gap in the tents and, peering out, spotted a young man wearing spectacles. A child's balloon popped nearby and Seraphina watched as the man froze, a slight tremor moving up his hand and arm.

Seraphina winced as the voices in her head became frantic, growing louder until their message came pouring out of her as she stepped out into the open:

“This man is a Servant of God!”

The bespectacled man stopped and turned pale as his hand flew to his throat.

“Ex-excuse me?” he stammered, his trembling hand fingering the knot of his necktie.

“We know who you are! Have you come to preach Salvation?” the commanding voice echoed again from Seraphina.

The young man opened his mouth, shut it, and then ran away, nearly upsetting a popcorn cart in his panic. By now, Bella had emerged from Seraphina's tent and hustled her inside as Seraphina continued to shout “Servant of God!” after the fleeing young man.

“*What* are you doing?” Bella demanded when they were back inside.

Seraphina had gone quiet and leaned, panting, against Bella.

“You know how I feel about preachers,” Bella continued, depositing Seraphina in her chair.

“I'm sorry,” Seraphina said softly, “I couldn't help it.”

Bella sighed heavily and straightened Seraphina's shawls.

“I'll give you five minutes,” she said. “You've gathered quite a crowd, and we mustn't keep them waiting.”

Just before dawn the next day, Seraphina left Bella snoring in their shared caravan and crept through the sleeping circus to the edge of the fields. She felt restless. Sitting on an old stone wall, she watched the sky slowly brighten. The road into Phillipsburg ran

beside the wall and, looking down it, Seraphina could see a church steeple towering over the dark rooftops of the town, the cross at its pinnacle silhouetted against the pale, blushing pink of the sky.

The morning peace was broken by the rising urgency of the voices in Seraphina's head. She turned, just as the same bespectacled young man rounded a bend in the road, walking towards town. Seraphina stepped into the road and called out in a deep voice:

“Servant of God! Are you here to speak of Salvation?”

The man stopped and stared at Seraphina as she strode towards him. A hateful smirk twisted the girl's face as she said, “We know what you are! Why do you hide, *priest?*”

The man swallowed hard and said, “I-I was a priest. I mean, I *am* a priest, I just . . .”

“You hide from Him as you hide from us. Who, then, do you serve?”

“I-I serve the Lord . . .”

The priest raised a hand to his forehead, lowered it to his chest, but then dropped it, trembling, to his side. Seraphina laughed and her eyes narrowed.

“So you say, yet still you hide!”

The priest remained silent as he clasped his trembling hands together. Seraphina stepped closer.

“He allowed them to *die*,” she said, “Precious life annihilated before your eyes. Who could save them? Not *you!* But why didn't He?”

“I beg you . . . stop,” the priest said, his shaking hands now clenched together so tightly his fingers grew white.

“Where was your God?”

“Please . . .” the priest's voice caught, and he sank onto his knees in the road.

Another sharp bark of laughter echoed from Seraphina, and the priest looked up at her. The rising sun cast an eerie crimson glow upon the girl's face, and in it he saw so many others he had

known: bloodied, scorched, and staring, sightless, beyond his help. Now before him was another young life, another fluttering, fragile, eternal soul trapped by forces so much more powerful than he. He too felt trapped, pinned down by his broken body, his broken spirit, the whole broken world.

“Lord, have mercy,” he whispered, as he raised a shaking hand and slowly crossed himself.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light behind the girl’s head. The cross atop the church had caught the light of the sun and blazed forth, dazzling the priest’s eyes. In that moment, with a sudden, luminous clarity, he understood the power in his weakness.

Slowly, the priest stood up from the dusty road and raised a steady hand, outstretched towards the wretched girl. Then, with a voice so like his own, and yet with a new authority, he called out, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave her!”

Seraphina let out a piercing shriek and crumpled to the ground, just as Bella came lumbering across the field to see what all the fuss was about.

When Seraphina awoke, she was back in her bed with Bella’s face looming above her.

“My darling!”

Seraphina blinked and tried to sit up.

“Where is . . .”

“That preacher? I chased him off, the scoundrel.”

Seraphina could hear the rushing, pulsing sound of her own heartbeat in her ears.

“Auntie Bella!”

“Yes, pet?”

“The voices! They’re . . . gone.”

Bella’s face drained of all color.

That afternoon, the snake charmer was very put out.

“Why is Bobby cracking the whip to get moving *now*? I had a date!”

“He and Bella were fighting like cats this morning,” said the sword-swallower.

“Seraphina would know why.”

“Have you seen her?”

“No.”

All that long, hot afternoon, the children of Phillipsburg left their games and chores to watch with sorrow as their circus dreams collapsed in a candy-striped heap and rolled away down the road.

In the center of town, below a steeple with a cross glistening in the late summer sun, a young priest in a starched, white collar knelt in the cool quiet before the altar. His single suitcase lay on the floor beside him, with a pair of spectacles tucked inside. In a pew a few rows back, Seraphina lay sleeping peacefully, her face radiant in the sunlit patterns of stained-glass saints.

DEVOTIONAL



All We Need Is Love

(1 John 4:7-11)

MATT RITZERT

St. Jane de Chantal Writing Group

Restless. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word as lacking or denying rest, uneasy. To be troubled, unsettled, anxious. Those words could be used to describe many of us who are chasing dream jobs, bigger houses, more prestige, and greater honor. The more we chase the next big thing, the more restless we feel. The new car gets banged up. The awards won at school gather dust; the words of praise fade away. Bigger, better, more. We may even call ourselves spiritual and try to adhere to a self-described religion of the Golden Rule. We try to do the right thing and try to be a good person, but something is missing. It's never enough. And if we peer over the fence creating the lines that define our own little world, we are confronted by more unrest and emptiness in everything from politics to chat groups.

The answer to our restlessness? In the divisive and turbulent decade of the 1960s, the Beatles produced a song called "All You Need Is Love." It was released in 1967 during the so-called "Summer of Love." It was an anti-war anthem urging us to love rather than fight. The song was a hit, but it didn't prompt much change. The following year produced more assassinations, violence, and unrest. But there is another kind of love that can give us the peace we seek. The message is not delivered in a rock song but in words that come

from Scripture. In 1 John 4:7–11, John delivers a message of love echoing the words of Jesus Christ, a message that can settle our uneasy, anxious, and restless hearts and lead us to eternal life. John writes, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

We are called to love one another with a love that flows from God. It is a strong and mighty love, one strong enough to prompt great sacrifice. John continues, “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” And John tells us that God calls us to do the same: “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

And what is love? Since the time of St. Thomas Aquinas, Christians have frequently defined love as willing the good of the other. It’s not a feeling or an emotion. Love is action, the giving of oneself. Jesus taught us how to act, how to love. Jesus healed. He welcomed sinners. He served others. He forgave the very people who killed him. He turned injury into compassion. The “religion” of the Golden Rule might motivate us to perform random acts of kindness and to help one another simply because we feel obligated to do the right thing. But Jesus acted out of love and compassion, not merely out of obligation or societal expectation. The love of Jesus and the love He expects us to share with others is an intentional, self-sacrificing love that is given freely with no grumbling or complaint. Random acts of kindness are transformed into acts of love. By following Jesus’s example, loving one another, sharing his love for us with others, we find peace and rest that turn upside down our preoccupations with material things. It is that preoccupation with the self that gives rise to restlessness, anxiety, and worry. To occupy ourselves with love is to find rest in God, to devote our attention and time not to money, power, prestige, and all the other stuff we chase after day after day

after day, but to give ourselves to the other. John Lennon wrote in the Beatles song, “All we need is love, love is all we need.” Well, almost. All we need is God’s love and to spread that love to others.



Heart-to-Heart Conversations with God the Father

(Eph 1:17)

LISA MACHADO

St. Hildegard of Bingen and St. Jane de Chantal Writing Groups

First-century Ephesus was a thriving economic and cultural hub where it was common to worship various gods, including Artemis and Zeus. The gods of today's modern era typically have names so subtle we may not recognize them: We may prioritize physical appearance, social media, news channels, technology, family, and even our pets. These worldly things are not inherently bad, but they can, individually or collectively, compete for space in our hearts, distracting us from spending time with the one true God.

As human creatures, it does not seem logical that it is possible to know, on a personal level, the true God, the One who breathes creation. Yet, this *is* possible!

Knowing someone personally requires the mutual cooperation of open and vulnerable hearts. This relationship often comes with sacrifice. Giving time to another is more valuable than any material gift; yet our distractions challenge our ability—even our desire—to give time to another person. Being available to listen, to engage in dialogue, and to share innermost thoughts does not always come naturally. We can appear weak when we admit our fears and failures; yet through humility, relationships can become stronger as

we commune at an interior level, where one heart speaks to another heart. God creates us to live in fellowship, to commune, with one another.

God also creates us to commune with himself. He speaks to us in creative ways. Are we listening? It is in silence that we are likely to hear the soft voice of his Spirit. The silence may be present in our physical surroundings, or the silence exists within the heart, in spite of the noise around us. Mother Teresa said, “God speaks in the silence of the heart.” How has God spoken to us today?

Providing interior space within our hearts allows the relationship to develop. He comes to our interior space when we invite him to our prayer, when we reflect on his creation, when we read Scripture, and when we ponder or imitate the life of Jesus Christ. When our heart makes the movement from *knowing* about God to *experiencing* God, we can be transformed.

Within the Gospels, Jesus reminds his followers that his heart is one with the Father. To know Jesus is to know the Father. Since the disciples saw Jesus withdrawing often to pray alone with the Father, they asked, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1), to which he responded with the words of the Lord’s Prayer. We are fortunate they asked!

Moving from knowing about God’s heart to experiencing God’s heart can be a lifelong journey. We are invited into the relationship, to take part in it. We do not control it, nor should we try to control it. We would be wise to imitate Christ by meeting the Father in a quiet space, with an open heart, away from the noisy demands of the world. We may not hear his voice right away. There may be times when he is silent. As with any authentic relationship, the relationship will mature as we present “as is,” with our flawed selves. He will reveal his heart. He will surprise us. We will learn to trust more. Augustine refers to this interior meeting space as “the altar of the heart,” a sacred space where we surrender our most private thoughts.

John Henry Newman describes God's communication to humans as "the heart speaks to the heart."

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know him.

How will we make space for heart-to-heart conversations with God the Father?



Hope That Endures

(Rom 5:5)

CHRISTINE McPARLAND ROSSI

St. Thomas More Writing Group

“Hope” can have very different meanings depending on the context. We hope for a warm, sunny Easter but wake up to snow instead. Or we hope that God will answer our prayers to heal a loved one, and that loved one dies anyway.

This second form of hope is the riskiest, because its disappointments hurt the most. Get burned too many times, and our self-protective instincts take over. We shrink back, forfeiting hope’s possibilities for the comfort of certainty—even if it’s the certainty of not hoping at all.

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul speaks of an enduring hope: “We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. . . . And hope does not disappoint us” (5:2, 5).

By itself, such a claim appears to be self-contradictory. What hope is there that does not carry with it the possibility of remaining unfulfilled? Even Paul, later in his letter, observes, “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?” (Rom 8:24).

Perhaps the key to disappointment lies not in the nature of hope itself but in the object of our hope. We can all recall things we’ve hoped for and didn’t receive (some of these, we realize in hindsight, wouldn’t have made us happy after all). Yet even if we’ve

been blessed to enjoy many fulfilled hopes throughout our lives, is it not a disappointing reality that they must end at our death?

St. Paul writes about a different hope altogether, because its object is eternal: the love and glory of God. “Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).

We can imagine that it was this hope that sustained Jesus on the road to Calvary and through those agonizing hours on the cross. He realized his death would break his disciples’ hearts—and not just their hearts but also, very likely, their hopes for a Messiah. The crucifixion appeared to be the fatal blow to Israel’s hope that God would finally redeem his people from oppression and restore their earthly kingdom.

Had this version of the disciples’ hope for Israel materialized, the Romans would have been overthrown, and the Jewish nation would have enjoyed peace and prosperity for generations to come. But they would still bear the burden of their sins, symbolized by the endless sacrifices taking place in the temple. And they would still face death, no matter how peaceful and prosperous their lives had been.

This hope did indeed die with the crucifixion of their rabbi; but with the resurrection of their Lord, something greater took its place. A temporal wish had been replaced with an eternal reality that surpassed their imaginations: the hope of being free from their sins, free even from the curse of death, and free to live in the love of God for eternity.

Each life has its share of hopes that die and are buried in the cold dark of a tomb. But no matter how long our Good Friday and Holy Saturday stretch on, Easter is always coming. The cross and the tomb are no longer the end of the story. They weren’t for Jesus, and because of his resurrection victory, they won’t be for us either.

In this hope, perhaps we will find the root of all our hopes. From the passing wish for a sunny day to the heart-wrenching prayer for a loved one’s healing, we recognize a deeper desire for happiness,

wholeness, and well-being—a desire that can only be perfectly and forever fulfilled in heaven.

Such hope, indeed, does not disappoint.



Keep Going, Love

(1 John 3:18–24)

MJ MEISTER

St. Jane de Chantal Writing Group

What if we could be assured that God is with us, right here, right now? Would it change the way we treat each other?

It's easy to believe God is somewhere off in the distance, far from our ordinary experience. But St. John the Apostle dispelled that idea in his letters to early Christians, describing Jesus's time on earth and the Father's plans for us. He said we should be called children of God because of the great love the Father gave to us. St. John taught that this gift of love is not only for us, but we are to give it away by loving one another. St. John also shared how we are to love: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John 3:18).

So, it's not enough to simply be—we must act. The Ten Commandments define truth and action for us, but the ancient language of the Old Testament can be confusing in today's world. In 2018, Pope Francis spoke at length on the Ten Commandments in his general audiences, diving deeply into the idea of truth and action, clarifying in a series of teachings what the commandments mean for us. Pope Francis concluded the series by saying that the Ten Commandments are "the contemplation of Christ in order to open ourselves up to receive his heart, to receive his desires, to receive his Holy Spirit." His words echo St. John's statement, "All who obey

his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us” (1 John 3:24).

It seems the more we learn about following Jesus, the harder it is. Oh, how often we fail. None of us is perfect. We are all sinners. Yet we grow closer to God as we consciously lean into his teachings, one small step at a time. Reading and contemplating the commandments may not immediately change our lives, but it can be enough to make us stop and think.

Maybe we get caught up in current issues and automatically repost the latest sound bites that align with our views. It’s not lethal. It’s only an opinion. Reposting on social media is no big deal. Or is it? If we consider the growing body of research linking social media to the mental health crisis in today’s adolescents, we might pass on the casual repost. That small act of restraint becomes an intentional choice to resist adding to the negative emotional energy on social media.

Doing our part to calm the rhetoric is relatively easy in this example because of the virtual distance in online interactions. Managing our in-person relationships in a posture of love first is more challenging, especially when we are the one hurting. After all, the person is usually up close in our personal space, and that quick and hurtful comeback is on the tip of our tongue. But when we have a heart for following the commandments, we begin to feel God’s presence. It may be just a tiny mental interruption, but it is enough to remind us that we are called to love. Instead of letting it all out in frustration, try a silent prayer, like the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Or, mentally recite a few of the Divine Praises: “Blessed be God. Blessed be his holy name. Blessed be the name of Jesus.” This can create the breathing space we need to remember that God is right here.

We often think of love as it’s portrayed in the movies. It doesn’t matter if it’s a romance, a family saga, or a hero’s journey: love

is something the characters *feel*. It's happening *to* them, and the audience follows along, caught up in every emotional twist and turn. But St. John tells us that real love for one another is a decision of the will. It's a choice we make. Emotional reactions are not the same as the Spirit of God.

When we use that tiny mental interruption to change the focus from ourselves to the other person, we win. The result is less anger and hurt, more purposeful interactions, and more love. What's more, we start to notice that still, small voice within. Somehow, we just know. He is here with us. He knows everything. Keep going.



Hope Amidst Fear

(Rev 20)

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The Book of Revelation is full of frightening imagery and doomsday scenarios. From the four horsemen (6:1–8) to an abundance of both cosmic and earthly turmoil (6:12–14), it is no wonder that this book strikes fear into those who read it. But what if we were to read the Book of Revelation not as a doomsday text, but as a cautionary tale? Certainly the frightening imagery stands out and catches our attention. Perhaps it is the initial fear of this imagery that tends to hide the message of hope. Wait. Among these scary images, there is hope? Yes! God will never abandon us. He wants to save us from sin and death. In allowing him to save us, we allow him to lead us to goodness and life.

When the end time comes, John explains that those who have “not worshiped the beast or its image” or “received its mark on their foreheads or their hands” (Rev 20:4), as well as those whose names are written in the book of life (see 20:12–15), will all live in the new Jerusalem. In other words, anyone who does not follow Satan, false gods, and idols will have eternal life with God. In contrast, the one “whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” (20:15) where Satan and his followers will likewise be thrown at the end of time (20:10).

The Book of Revelation may seem like Pandora's box, full of fear and horrible things, but like the box, it contains hope—a hope that outshines any amount of evil and illuminates any amount of darkness.

While John's apocalyptic work is full of destruction, despair, and death, its ultimate message is one of salvation, hope, and life. So long as we follow God and his commandments, we shall not taste death but instead rise with him to eternal life.

