

The summer of 2004, I think, I was a camp counselor at a Lutheran bible camp in Idaho. One week, I had this kid in my group, whose name is lost to the sands of time. We'll call him Danny. Danny was going into 5th grade, and had never been away from home overnight—and here he is at this week-long, sleep-away Bible camp. The poor kid was beside himself with homesickness. He would just start crying at the drop of a hat, pleading with me to call his folks and have them come pick him up.

Drop off was Sunday. I don't remember how we made it through Sunday, but we did. Monday was not much better. By Tuesday, he was participating more with the rest of the group, but he'd still just all-of-a-sudden start bawling and begging to go home.

I tried listening to his fears. I tried being hopeful and getting him to think about what fun this would be. I tried redirecting him to something he enjoyed. He'd be having a great time one moment, and the next he'd start crying again. I'd say, "Look, you're having fun!" and he'd just say, "I want to go home!"

By Wednesday I was out of ideas. By Wednesday, when he'd get sad, I'd get angry. I actually yelled at him! I yelled at a kid who was crying for his parents. Looking back, I can see now that I wasn't angry at him, but at myself, because I couldn't fix what was wrong. I'd said all the right things, taken all the correct steps, and I couldn't make him stop being homesick, and that made me angry. Isn't that silly? To be angry at a child for missing his parents? But in that moment, when I lacked control over the situation I believed it was my job to control, I was angry, probably because I was scared, because I didn't know what to do.

That's what I see in the story of Holy Week. I see a bunch of people who believe it is their job to be in control—camp counselors for a nation, you might say—and when they lose control, they get angry, probably because they are scared. You can see it in how they react. They not only kill Jesus, they seal him in a tomb and set guards to watch it. They set guards on a corpse! They are trying to regain control. It all made sense in the moment, but looking back, it's about as absurd as yelling at a homesick child.

By contrast, though, notice what God does in the story. Instead of trying to control the situation, Jesus always chooses to act in love, even when he has to relinquish control.

It seems like others are setting the course of the events, but we find out today that despite everything they have done, God still owns the story.

Anger, fear, violence, force, compulsion... these are the tools we use in the story, and they all fail to stand up to the calm and consistent love that God continually shows throughout. St. Matthew uses the dramatic scene of the earth shaking, the stone rolling away, and the living guards dropping like stones to paint that picture for us. When faced with the power of heaven—the power of love—every power *we* prefer to wield falls short. One simply cannot order a child out of homesickness.

It's obvious to me now what I should have done back then in 2004. I know now that there's no way to take away what Danny was feeling—but I could have just loved him through it. He was fine by the end of the week, of course; he had a blast Thursday and Friday and was excited to come back the next summer—go figure! Had I trusted that would happen and given up my need to be in control of the situation, maybe I could have figured out what he really needed in his fear, which was probably someone to listen to him and help him feel safe and secure.

Julian of Norwich, when she was a young woman, had a near-death experience, during which she received several visions. Later in life, she recounted these visions, and what she learned from them. In one vision, she observed that everything that exists “lasts and always will because God loves it... [E]verything has being through the love of God...God made it, God loves it, and God preserves it,” she writes.ⁱ In other words, it is only by the continual love of God poured out that everything in existence continues to be.

That is what Easter is: it is a reminder of God's infinite love, poured out for us infinitely. It is that love that creates us, and that love that sustains us—something we are powerless to do for ourselves. It is that love that renews us and helps us grow, and at our life's end, it is that love that gives us hope for life that is made new in ways previously unimagined.

I have no words for this love, and so instead, I'd like to invite you to try something with me. I'd like to invite you into a moment of contemplation of this love.ⁱⁱ

Sit up straight, with your feet flat on the floor (if you're able), and fold your hands in your lap. You want to be relaxed and comfortable, but alert. Next, we bow. Shunryu Suzuki says that when we bow, we give ourselves up; we relinquish control. Before we can meet the risen Christ, we have to first let go of the notion that we are in control; so instead, we set our minds on things above, rather than the things of earth, as Paul says. We bow and give ourselves up in communal gratitude for the miracle of being here, alive, together, in this moment.

Sitting still, straight, with our eyes closed or lowered to the ground, we begin by simply becoming aware of our breathing. Breathe in, breathe out. Slow, deep, natural breaths.

(Pause and breathe)

Now, with each inhalation, listen sincerely to God's silent, "I love you," God giving Godself away to us, whole and complete, in each breath, sustaining us every moment in love, just like Julian saw. Each breath in is the infinity of God pouring itself for us infinitely, in the self-donating gift of this inhalation.

(Pause and breathe)

Then, with each exhalation, let go of yourself and exhale yourself in love, a self-donating act, giving back the gift God has given. With each exhalation, give yourself to this infinite love that, with the next inhalation, is infinitely giving Itself back to you, for in the reciprocity of love, our destiny—creation's destiny—is fulfilled. Inhaling. Exhaling. Breathing this love.

(Pause and breathe)

Become aware of what arises in you. Maybe it's something troubling and burdensome, either in your own life or in the life of someone you love. Maybe it's a source of fear, or a source of confusion, or a source of abandonment; something that is burdensome to your heart, an obstacle to loving yourself, or someone else, or God.

(Pause and breathe)

As you inhale, inhale God’s self-donating love, loving you through and through and through and through, burden and all, finding no more hindrance to being infinitely in love with you than the stone and the guards at Jesus’ tomb.

(Pause and breathe)

And with each exhalation, exhale yourself, giving yourself in love—burden and all—to this Love loving you, burden and all, preserving you in your being, unexplainably, forever.

(Pause and breathe)

And end by asking God for the grace of returning to this place of love over and over and over again, until, little by little, it begins to saturate everything else in your life, and you start to see everything else floating on this tide of love poured out, poured in, endlessly.

ⁱ Julian of Norwich “Showings” (long text), Ch 5. The Classics of Western Spirituality, Richard J. Payne, ed. Paulist Press, 1978. pp130-131

ⁱⁱ Adapted from James Finley, “I Love You Prayer,” Center for Action and Contemplation, Jan 24, 2023.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CW8jYewLLA&t=2s>