

## **Garden of Gethsemane is the place to let go of our resentments**

### **Living In Exile**

**Ron Rolheiser, OMI**

"When you carry someone's cross, don't send him or her the bill!"

This is one of the lessons of Gethsemane. The challenge of being an adult, one who helps carry life for others, is to give ourselves over in love, duty and service without resentment. Those last words are key: Real love is not simply a matter of giving ourselves over in service and duty (mostly we have to do this anyway, whether we want to or not). It's a question of giving ourselves over without being resentful.

This was one of the struggles of Jesus in Gethsemane. He was asked to give up his life and freedom for something higher and, like all of us, felt a fierce resistance. Nobody, easily and naturally, gives himself or herself over to the deeper demands of love, duty and service. Transformation through prayer is needed to bring us there.

We see this in Jesus: Only after having prayed is he finally able to say: "Yet not my will, but yours, be done." When he says this, his gift is pure. He is able to give himself over without resentment to the demands of a love which will take his whole life. After his prayer in Gethsemane, he is able to do what he needs to do without the feeling that he is a victim.

Jesus is victimized, but never a victim. When Pontius Pilate tries to intimidate him by telling him: "I can save your life or I can take it," Jesus responds: Nobody takes my life from me, I give it up freely! "That translates: "You can't take from me by force what I have already freely given over out of love!"

And that's the lesson: We become life-giving adults and our love becomes free of manipulation only when we can say this and mean it: "Nobody takes my love and service from me, I give it over freely!" Only when we stop seeing duty as an unfair burden that we haven't chosen can we love and serve others without resentment and without making others feel guilty because of what it's costing us.

But, it's not easy to say those words and mean them. Like Jesus in the face of the deeper demands of love and duty, we initially say: "Let this cup pass! There's got to be a way out of this, a way for me to become free of this." That's natural. It's natural to want our freedom, to want to be free of burdens, of duty, of unfair circumstance. Nobody wants a martyrdom that he or she didn't sign up for!

But eventually this form of martyrdom finds us all. If we are sensitive and good-hearted, love will frequently become duty, demanding circumstance and an invitation to sacrifice ourselves for someone or something else. Always there will be someone or something making demands on our freedom and opportunity: children who need us, an aging parent who has only us, family obligations, a spouse with an illness, a crisis at our workplace, a tsunami in Asia, a war we don't want, a church that needs volunteers, and obligations of every kind that come from being sensitive to the demands of God, family, church, country morality and the poor.

The world is not divided between those who are burdened by duty and those who are free of it. Anyone who is sensitive and good is burdened by duty. The world is divided up rather between those who are burdened with duty and are resentful about it and those who are

burdened with duty and are not resentful about it.

That is very much the lesson of Gethsemane: What Jesus gave over to his Father in the garden is not perhaps so much his life, since his enemies were closing in on him and he might have had to die in any case, irrespective of any willingness or unwillingness on his part. Thousands of people die violently every day, against their will. There's nothing special in that. What's special in Jesus is how he prepared himself to meet that death, namely, by being willing to die without resentment, without putting a price tag on it, without making anyone feel guilty about it and with a heart that was warm rather than cold, forgiving rather than bitter, and large and understanding enough that it didn't have to demand its due. In the face of bitter duty, he took his life and his love and made them a free gift.

That's the greatest struggle we have in love. We're good people mostly, but, like the older brother of the prodigal son, all too often we nurse resentment, even as we do all the right things. That leaves us outside the house of love, hearing the music but unable to dance, bitter about life's unfairness. We need, at some point, to say: "not my will, but yours, be done."

If we say that and mean it, we will taste for the first time ever real freedom.

Our deepest pain is that of moral loneliness, the desire for a soulmate

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Our deepest loneliness is not sexual, but moral. More than we yearn for someone to sleep with sexually and emotionally, we yearn for someone to sleep with morally. What we really want is a soulmate.

What does this mean?

Ancient philosophers and mystics used to say that, before being born, each soul is kissed by God and then goes through life always, in some dark way, remembering that kiss and measuring everything in relation to its original sweetness.

Inside each of us, there is a dark memory of having once been touched and caressed by hands far gentler than our own. That caress has left a permanent imprint inside us, one so tender and good that its memory becomes a prism through which we see everything else.

Thus we recognize love and truth outside of us precisely because they resonate with something that is already inside us. Things "touch our hearts" because they awaken a memory of that original kiss. Moreover, because we have a memory of once having been perfectly touched, caressed and loved, every experience we meet in life falls a little short. We have already had something deeper. When we feel frustrated, angry, betrayed, violated or enraged it is because our outside experience does not honour what we already know and cling to inside.

And that dark memory, of first love, creates a place inside us where we hold all that is precious and sacred. It is the place we most guard from others, but the place where we would most want others

to enter; the place where we are the most deeply alone and the place of intimacy; the place of innocence and the place where we are violated; the place of compassion and the place of rage.

The yearning and pain we feel here can be called moral loneliness because we are feeling lonely in that precise place where we feel most strongly about the right and wrong of things; that is, we feel alone in that place where all that is most precious to us is cherished, guarded and feels vulnerable when it is not properly honoured.

Paradoxically, it is the place where we most want someone to enter and yet where we are most guarded. On the one hand, we yearn to be touched inside this tender space because we already know the joy of being caressed there. On the other hand, we don't often, nor easily, let anyone penetrate there. Why: Because what is most precious in us is also what is most vulnerable to violation and we are, and rightly so, deeply cautious about whom we admit to that sacred place. Thus, often, we feel wrenchingly alone in our deepest centre.

A fierce loneliness results, a moral aching. More deeply than we long for a sexual partner, we long for moral affinity, for someone to visit us in that deep part where all that is most precious is cherished and guarded. Our deepest longing is for a partner to sleep with morally, a kindred spirit, a soulmate. Great friendships and great marriages, invariably, have this at their root, deep moral affinity. The persons in these relationships are "lovers" in the true sense because they sleep with each other at the deepest level, irrespective of whether they have sex or not. In terms of feeling, this kind of love is experienced as a "coming home," as finding a home, bone of my bone. Sometimes, though not always, it is

accompanied by romantic love and sexual attraction. Always, however, there is a sense that the other is a kindred spirit, one whose affinity with you is founded upon valuing preciously the same things you do.

But such a love, as we know, is not easily found. Most of us spend our lives looking for it, searching restless, dissatisfied, morally lonely.

It's this kind of loneliness that brought Jesus to his knees in the Garden of Gethsemane. The blood he sweated there is the blood of a lover, one betrayed, morally betrayed, hung out to dry in all that was precious to him.

Nikos Kazantsakis once wrote that virtue is lonely because, at the end of the day, it is jealous of vice. "Virtue," he writes, "sits on its lonely perch and weeps for all it's missed out on." Not quite, though perhaps that's what it feels like.

But the pain of virtue, while not immune to jealousy, is a whole lot deeper than Kazantsakis (and conventional wisdom) suspect. It's the pain of Gethsemane, of moral loneliness, the ache of not having anyone to sleep with morally.

One of the lessons of Gethsemane is that when we sweat our moral aloneness (without giving in to compensation or bitterness) we undergo a moral alchemy that can produce a great nobility of the soul. "What's madness," Theodore Roethke asks, "But nobility of soul at odds with circumstance?" True. And that madness intensifies loneliness, even as, more than anything else, it opens the soul to the possibility of finally finding a kindred spirit.