

One of my favorite writers on the spiritual life is Ron Rolhesier, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate priest who lives in Texas. He recounts the following story which a woman confided in him –

She married a man she loved but, early in the marriage she was too immature to responsibly carry her part of the relationship. One night she went to a party with her husband, drank too much, and left the party with another man. Eventually she sobered up and repentantly found her way home, fully experiencing the marital skies to be ripped asunder with anger. But her husband, though hurt and shaken by what had happened was calm, philosophical, direct.

When she walked sheepishly into the room he demanded neither an explanation nor an apology. He simply said to her: “I’m going away for a few days so that you can be alone because you need to decide who you are: are you a married woman or are you something else?” He took a three day sabbatical from her; she cried, sorted out the question he had put to her, and, today, years beyond this painful incident, she is inside a solid marriage and infinitely more aware that the pearl of great price comes precisely at a great price.

Growing up we have to learn the hard lesson that every choice is a renunciation. We painfully struggle to make clear choices, particularly when it comes to love, but we want so many other things too. Every choice is a series of renunciations.

The problem comes down to the fact that we have an insatiable appetite for more. We have an infinite capacity for more but keep trying out new finite things in this world. People, possessions, power. We are fired into this world with a madness that comes from the gods and has us believe that we are destined to embrace the cosmos itself. We don’t want something, we want everything. As Christians we believe that we are meant to embrace everyone and we already hunger for that. We always hunger for more. Our sexuality makes us very demanding. That’s what makes life difficult. We are over-charged in our own lives. We have divine fire inside us, want everything, yearn for the whole world, and yet, at some point, have to commit to one particular person, at one particular place, and in one particular life, with all the limits that imposes.

What faith leads us to believe is that we are seeking to be divine. As Saint Augustine put it, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are

restless until they rest in You.” Adam and Eve wanted to be like God but without God. Their scene has been repeating itself ever since. And yet God wants to share the intimate divine life with us too.

In trying to explain some of the deeper secrets of life, Jesus gives us this parable: the kingdom of God is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he finds a single pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he owns and buys that pearl. That pearl, the pearl of great price, the value of love and its cost, is in essence the challenge which the young husband put to his wife.

For what are you willing to renounce other things? What is your own pearl of great price? Are you willing to give up everything in exchange for it? Are you willing to live with its limits? Until we are clear on these questions there is forever the danger that, like the wife, we will act out in dangerous and hurtful ways.

Thoreau once said: “The youth gets together material to build a bridge to the moon or perhaps a place for a temple; At length the middle-ager decides to build a woodshed with such materials.” And in old age we learn that the fulfillment of our desires is in letting go. Or so I am learning each day.

This message isn’t only for married people. Monks and nuns take up the charge to seek God above all things. Saint Benedict wrote that the first requirement for an aspirant to monastic life is whether he or she truly seeks God. We say, “of course I do,” but then we wander, satisfied with many other persons or things. We are satisfied with lesser goods. Our renunciation isn’t deep enough to open up the deep abyss we have that only God will satisfy.

Solomon shone in his openness to God and his request for the gift of wisdom. But it didn’t last. He was led astray by his enchantment with riches, sexual gratification, and kingly power. He had yet to discover that this isn’t a one time promise. It had to grow, deepen, become lost in love.

Yes, we fail and hopefully grow deeper in love through our mistakes. We pick ourselves up and go on. I remember a poster we had in the sixties. I think it was a Japanese saying. It read “Seven times down and eight times up.” Or as Saint Paul says today, “All things work for the good of those who love God.”

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