

who don't can be urged to follow the impulses of my analysis and to reflect concretely and creatively on the shape of their own faithfulness.

One final note about "possessing" virtues or fruit. If, as I will try to demonstrate, we cannot recognize, nourish, embody or sustain these dispositions *on our own*, then we should probably stop thinking and speaking as if these virtues are somehow our own individual *possessions*. Indeed, such ways of thinking and speaking encourage us to think of possessing these fruit or virtues as a goal to be achieved or an accomplishment to be sought, primarily for our own sakes. But this is to get things backward. Virtues are those dispositions to act in certain ways rather than others that are rooted deeply in the dynamics of any community; they both reflect and sustain that common life. Yet the common life of the Christian community is intended to glorify God, not the community. Thus if a community of Christians discerns that one of its members is bearing the fruit of patience, it will only be because a community of the Spirit exists that has learned to recognize, cherish and nourish that fruit. Nurturing individual fruit in individual lives is not our ultimate goal. Instead, the church is called to embody before the world in all its relationships the kind of reconciled and transformed life that God desires for all of creation. This is a lofty goal and one we would be foolish to think that we could achieve apart from God's powerful working in our lives. But it is precisely this high calling to which we have been called and as an aid to which these reflections are offered.

## TWO

### Cultivating Love in the Midst of Market-Style Exchanges

*My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. (Jn 15:8-10)*

*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Lk 6:32-36)*

**T**he half-page ad runs regularly in our college newspaper. It is aimed, no doubt, primarily at our students, many of whom live hours from home and often find themselves in need of a little extra cash. In large letters the ad announces: BECOME A PLASMA DONOR AND EARN UP TO \$130 PER MONTH. Lest the thought of selling your plasma appear a bit mercenary, the ad immediately informs the reader that the plasma is made into "products" that benefit hemophiliacs, burn victims and cardiovascular patients. The ad closes with what is presumably the company's motto: "Be a Plasma Donor . . . Because Life Is Everybody's Business."

Shortly after the ads began running I asked some students how they thought Christians should think about such matters. Should Christians sell their life-giving bodily fluids to someone who will turn around and make a



profit by selling these “products” to people in dire need of them? Given who we are, shouldn’t we be willing to be donors in the truest sense, as those who offer a gift? The sheepish looks on several faces suggested that some of them had already pocketed their bonus money for their initial visit. One even approached me later and said that he was embarrassed to admit it, but it had never occurred to him that Christians might refuse to engage in such practices. I suspect he’s not the only one.

Cultures like ours encourage us to consider all aspects of our lives in terms of self-interest. How do we cultivate a life marked by God’s love—a love that is always directed toward the needs of others—in a culture so thoroughly saturated with self-concern? Before considering what cultivating the practice of Christian love might look like, we need to remind ourselves of the character of that love and its centrality to the life of God and the story of the church.

### The Centrality of Love

Most people who know anything about the Christian faith know that love stands at its center. Countless children have memorized “For God so loved the world . . .” (Jn 3:16), being instructed that this one verse summarizes the whole gospel. Most are also familiar with John’s simple but profound insistence that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). These and other passages of Scripture suggest that love is not simply one virtue among many. We are instructed on numerous occasions that loving God and neighbor sums up the whole law (Deut 6:4-5; Mk 12:28-30; Gal 5:14). Paul, the great advocate of the centrality of *faith* to the Christian life, remarks in his famous “love chapter” that although “faith, hope and love abide,” the “greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). A similar echo is heard in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where he insists that “the only thing that counts is faith made effective through love” (Gal 5:6). And when the Colossians are urged to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance and forgiveness, they are also urged, “above all,” to clothe themselves with love, “which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:12-14).

Thus that love heads Paul’s list of the Spirit’s fruit is hardly accidental. Indeed, many Christian thinkers across the ages have insisted that the fruit

of the Spirit listed by Paul are not nine separate fruit, of which love is simply the first. Rather, love—as embodied in Jesus Christ and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5)—most fully reflects the very character of God. Love ought, therefore, to be *the* primary disposition of the Christian life. The eight other virtues or dispositions that follow in Paul’s list might best be understood as amplifying and further specifying what is entailed by this way of love. In short, these other eight dispositions, taken together, characterize a life lived in, by and through God’s love. In this sense, love is much like light, which, when passing through a prism, breaks into its component colors.<sup>1</sup> Just as these colors neither exist apart from the light nor are something added to the light, so these eight fruit neither exist apart from nor are something added on to love. We might also note that just as each color blends seamlessly into those adjacent to it, so it is difficult (and perhaps even unwise) to draw excessively precise boundaries around these dispositions; they quite naturally seem to blend into each other.

### The Character of Love

Much has been written about the poverty of the English language when it comes to terms of endearment. As is commonly known, Greek has at least four different words that are commonly translated into English by the single word *love*. We typically use the word *love* to describe a wide range of sentiments, affections and dispositions toward an equally wide range of objects or people. We use the same word for the physical attraction between a man and a woman, the devotion of parents to their children, the bond between siblings, the affection of close friends, the pride of place given to one’s country, the adoration offered to God and even one’s personal preferences and tastes. In fact, some may justifiably doubt whether a word that can be applied with ease to both God and pizza can illuminate the character of the Christian life.

Given the centrality of love to both God’s character and the story of “God with us,” one would like to be able to recapture its potentially powerful resonances. Admittedly, such a recovery will not be easy. But perhaps we can make a start by reminding ourselves of several aspects of God’s love that distinguish it from much that we call love.



Scripture delineates several characteristic features of God's love. First, God's love for us is completely unmerited, completely undeserved. Central to the message of the gospel is that God has reached down to us in love despite our rebelliousness. For Christians, the definitive act of God's love is the Son's willingness to empty himself, become a human being and humbly take on the role of the suffering servant in order to reconcile us to God. As Paul argues in Romans, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (5:8). Though we see this feature of God's love most clearly in Jesus Christ, much of the Old Testament reminds us that God has always loved deeply. This reminder is offered perhaps most poignantly by the prophet Hosea, who reminds Israel that despite its whoring after false gods and repeated unfaithfulness, God constantly woos God's beloved people. Such passages remind us of a central Christian conviction: God's love is always a gift; we can do nothing to earn it. Paul instructs the Ephesians on this matter in one long but powerful sentence: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:4-7).

A second characteristic feature of God's love for us is its steadfastness. Because God's love for us is unmerited love, there is nothing we can do that can keep God from loving us. Even should we choose to spend eternity separated from God, there is no reason to think that God would thereby stop loving us. Indeed, some have suggested that it is precisely *because* God loves us so much that God refuses to coerce or manipulate us into loving in return. But even as the spurned lover, God's unrequited love remains steadfast. In a passage that is unsurpassed in its tribute to the unrelenting power of God's love, Paul asks the Romans:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus,

who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:31-39)

Third, God's love for us is suffering love. God does not love us from a distance; rather, God's love is such that it draws God into the very fabric of human life. Christians affirm that God's willingness to suffer with—as well as suffer for—God's people is manifested most supremely in the life, ministry and death of Jesus. Echoing the strains of the so-called Servant Songs of Isaiah (especially Is 53), the apostolic preaching contains an important refrain: this Messiah was a suffering Messiah (Acts 3:18; 8:30-35; 17:3; 26:3, 23; cf. Lk 24:26). The clear message throughout Scripture is that God never strands aloof, insulated from our sufferings. Instead, from the moment of creation God determined to be our God by willingly entering into our struggles, our sufferings. Thus the incarnation represents not a change in plans, but the supreme expression of the lengths to which God is willing to go in order to embody this eternal, steadfast and suffering love.

Finally, God's love knows no bounds. In addition to the boundaries of time and space noted above, God's love transcends those boundaries constructed by human societies. If Jesus reaffirmed what most Jews already knew when he stated that the law was summed up in the command to love God and neighbor, he sounded a distinct and piercing note when he insisted that his followers should love their enemies (Mt 5:43-48; Lk 6:27-36). Both passages make clear that the paradigm for such loving action is God's own character. Because God reaches out in love even to those who set themselves up as God's enemies, so should those who would revere God love their own enemies.

Jesus illustrates the radical nature of this teaching with his parable of the Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). This story is framed by a lawyer's inquiry about the proper interpretation of the double command to love God and neighbor. The



lawyer, "wanting to justify himself," seeks clarification about boundaries: "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds by telling the now-familiar story of the Samaritan, who by his willingness to care for the one in need—regardless of cultural boundaries—initiates the boundlessness of God's love. In light of the Samaritan's actions, we see that our tendency to offer our love only to those who meet specific criteria falls far short of God's way of loving. Perhaps Jesus hoped to get the lawyer to see this as well, and so he turned the lawyer's question around at the end of the story, asking not about who properly qualifies for being the *recipient* of love, but about *who acts neighborly*: "Which of these three, do you think, *was a neighbor* to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

### The Pattern of Love

After telling the story of the Samaritan and questioning the lawyer about its implications, Jesus speaks these final words: "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37). This kind of love, Jesus clearly seems to be saying, is what the command to love one's neighbor actually involves. Because God does not discriminate in loving, so neither can those who seek both to love God wholeheartedly and to pattern their ways after God's ways. John also reminds us that our love is always a response to God's prior action and that our love for God cannot be separated from our love of our fellow human beings:

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 Jn 4:19-21)

Again, the notion that God's people should seek to embody God's loving character is not a minor theme of Christian Scripture. Consider three more examples of God's people being instructed to love as God loves because God had so acted in the past on their behalf:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you

shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:33-34)

Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 5:1-2)

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (1 Jn 3:16-18; see also 1 Pet 2:20-25)

These examples, and countless others that could be cited, remind us that *the* defining feature of God's love is its "other-directedness." When we are called to imitate the love of God, we are being called out of ourselves, called to live a life of unconditional concern for the well-being of others. This holds even when Jesus admonishes us to "love our neighbors *as ourselves*" (Mt 22:39; cf. Lev 19:18). This admonition, which is sometimes cited in order to excuse, if not authorize, our penchant for selfish behavior, does nevertheless stand as an important reminder for those whose tendency is toward self-loathing. Such persons need to be reminded that they should not desire anything less for themselves than they do for others: God calls them to desire what is genuinely best for all. Unconditional concern for the well-being of all, including ourselves, is not, of course, the same as pursuing whatever I want, because the call to love oneself is a call to desire for ourselves what God desires for us. Thus even this kind of self-love is manifestly other-directed, for we love ourselves as a response to God's prior act of love.

The entire story of Scripture—from creation to consummation—is a story of God's relentless, other-directed love. But several questions remain, even for those who intensely desire to love as God loves. Is it possible for human beings to love in this way, to be other-directed as God is other-directed? Or perhaps more to the point: if it is possible, is this ability to love as God loves a gift or is it a disposition we should attempt to cultivate? With respect to the first question regarding the possibility, we would do well to heed the words of Mother Teresa, who echoes a theme that runs throughout the history of



Christian thinking—that God does not command the impossible:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, with thy whole soul and with thy whole mind.” This is the commandment of the great God, and he cannot command the impossible. Love is a fruit in season at all times, and within the reach of every hand. Anyone may gather it and no limit is set.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the second question, Scripture testifies that the ability to love as God loves is both gift and task. Paul tells the Romans that “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). Yet Paul sounds a different note after concluding his “love chapter”—a note that often goes unheard as a result of arbitrary chapter divisions—when he challenges the Corinthians to “pursue love” (1 Cor 14:1). Here we have a prime example of that seeming paradox that stands at the center of the Christian life (and horticulture): the fruit is always a gift, but it still requires hard work.

### Obstacles to the Life of Love

Many have written about how the word *love* is abused and how, as a result, people don’t really understand what genuine love is. But understanding is only part of the problem. Even if we were to *understand* God’s love completely, we would still likely be in deep trouble. So the above exposition, like all the ones that follow, must be kept in proper perspective. Gaining a deeper understanding of these virtues is only part of the task. Christians must take a further, riskier step: we must attempt to embody this mark of God’s character in this time and place. To do this we must take a closer look at those practices, convictions, virtues and narratives that are native to contemporary life and that impede the development of the Spirit’s fruit.

*Promoting self-interest.* An enormous amount of everyday life in the United States is shaped by economic practices. Few people would disagree that buying and selling goods and services is an integral feature of our daily lives. If this exchange of goods and services was simply an efficient means of securing the basic necessities of life, we might have less cause for concern. But we live and move and have our being within an economic system that

impacts nearly every aspect of our lives. The obvious strength of this system is its ability to deliver a tremendous variety of goods and services to vast numbers of people in a relatively cost-effective way. The advantages of such division of labor are obvious to anyone who has considered how different our lives would be if we had to grow our own food, sew our own clothes and build our own homes.

However, the obvious advantages of such a system are only part of the story. Most people who are adept at functioning within such an economic system rarely notice the potentially dangerous features of such systems. For example, even though the market system *could* be viewed as a mechanism for rendering mutual service, little in our society encourages us to do so. Instead, we are encouraged to operate in the marketplace as self-interested parties attempting to secure our own existence in the midst of others doing the same. As a result, we tend to view other people in the marketplace not as unique and splendid people in their own right who warrant our attention, but as actors in *our* drama. In our drama, these people play the part of producers of goods and services for *us*, or of potential customers for *our* goods and services, or of competitors whose own attempts to secure their livelihood may threaten *our* attempts to do the same. Can we really be other-directed when so many of our daily interactions encourage us to be self-interested, to pay attention to others only to the extent that they can benefit us?

*Putting a price on everything (and everyone).* The cultivation of love is also threatened by the way market relationships demand that we put a price on everything. Because of the complexity of the economy and its specialization, a common register or currency is required. For the system to work, everything that is part of that system must be able to be assessed some “value” in terms of that currency. In short, everything must have a price tag. Raw materials, transportation, manufacturing equipment, human labor, advertising space or even time itself—all must have a dollar figure placed upon them. Only in this way may we leave behind the inefficiencies of bartering systems. To grasp this, one need only imagine what going to the grocery store might involve if we were expected to barter for our food rather than traffic in pieces of paper, metal or plastic.



Few people, I suspect, would want to return to the bartering system. For most of us the idea of trading a bushel of potatoes for a pair of pants, or one's services as a lawyer for a new roof, sounds too complicated and inefficient. But even if we don't want to return to such a cumbersome system, comparing it with our own might highlight some of the latter's pervasive shortcomings. In other words, we may not want to go back, but we should understand as clearly as we can why market exchange systems may inhibit the cultivation of love.

People who are engaged in bartering are still involved in exchanges; however, they are not the same kind of exchanges as those made for money. Bartering requires a level of *direct* human interaction and cooperation that is unnecessary in the abstract market. Moreover, since all goods and services are not first being translated into a common currency, bartering also encourages a measure of give and take between the two parties when determining what counts for a fair exchange. In contrast, when I go to the supermarket and buy a box of corn flakes, I am not expected or encouraged to interact or cooperate with anyone at more than the most superficial level. I have no relationship at all with the people most responsible for making those corn flakes available. And I certainly am not invited to discuss the equity of the store's prices. All that is expected of me is a certain decency as I walk through the checkout line and plod down my \$3.89.

The two systems also differ in reach and impact. Bartering, by its very inefficiency and cumbersomeness, works only on a relatively small scale, both with respect to the number of people engaged and the number of goods and services exchanged. Thus bartering is usually found in agrarian economies where most people can provide for themselves at least some of what they need to subsist. Within such economies, bartering is used primarily to acquire those goods and services one cannot provide for oneself. As a result, at least some aspects of life remain outside the exchange system. But this is dramatically different in a highly specialized and efficient market economy like our own. Most people acquire through the market nearly all goods and services required for day-to-day existence, to say nothing of those purchased for comfort and convenience. As a result, it becomes all but "natural" within such a system to

expect that everything has a price, that everything is a potential commodity that may be secured in order to enrich my life. Thus in market economies like our own, we learn at an early age that nearly everything is for sale: food, clothing, housing, entertainment, art, physical abilities, expertise, knowledge, insight, image, prestige, health-care, security, time, affection, sex, loyalty and even our bodily tissues and organs.

The sheer pervasiveness of exchange relationships in our daily lives all but guarantees that our thinking will be affected by this mentality far beyond decisions about whether we can afford a new pair of shoes. A few examples may help to make the point.

Market economies place a precise dollar figure on our skills and abilities, which impacts our lives in at least three important ways. First, it is difficult to avoid equating people's worth with what they are paid. We quite naturally assume that a corporate lawyer is more important, has greater worth and should command greater respect than the woman who works in a sweatshop stitching blue jeans. Second, and closely related to the first point, such a system plays down the significance of those persons and things that cannot or do not automatically have a dollar figure assigned to them. Consider a stay-at-home parent, typically a woman, who spends her days working at innumerable unpaid tasks, each of which, if hired out, would immediately become visible within the economic system. But as it stands, this unremunerated work and to a large degree the person doing the work remain completely invisible as long as she continues to do the work. Even those persons who are convinced that engaging in such work is vitally important often admit feelings of utter worthlessness. Furthermore, such a system encourages us to think of our skills and abilities not in terms of what they can contribute to the common good of a community, but primarily in terms of the purchasing power they secure for us. How many people have chosen a line of work not primarily because they believed they would enjoy it or because it was a service worth rendering, but because it promised to pay well? As a result, our abilities and talents are transformed into one more commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace to the highest bidder.

*Contracting relationships.* Given the pervasiveness of self-interested ex-



changes, we should not be surprised if market-style thinking impacts some of our most cherished relationships. By evaluating our relationships to everyone and everything on the basis of self-interest, we foster a flinty indifference toward all those people and things that make no promise to enhance our lives. This helps explain why some people are more attached to their cars or homes than they are to other people. Put bluntly, as several recent advertisements have, people are a lot more trouble and a lot less dependable than cars, so why bother? Perhaps such cost-benefit analysis makes good sense when one is running a business, but what are we to think when we hear marriage partners explain that they have terminated a relationship because "the costs were too high"? Or because the relationship was no longer "meeting my needs"? Although many people would resist the notion that they view relationships contractually, this often appears to be what is happening: people agree to continue a relationship only as long as it meets certain needs; once those needs are no longer being met, they feel free to end the relationship. The contract has been broken, and so the relationship is dissolved. Can we hope to cultivate other-directed love in a society that encourages us to view each other as simply objects to be used?

Although we might be hesitant to admit it, the market mentality also affects our lives "inside" the church. This is due not only to the market's pervasiveness but also to the fact that what we do inside the walls of the church building cannot be easily sequestered from the activities we engage in the rest of the week. For example, Christians are not exempt from thinking and acting as if their commitment to Christ is simply one more consumer choice. They often cast themselves, whether knowingly or not, in the role of a consumer, expecting churches to woo them with programs and services that appeal to their particular interests. In response many churches have self-consciously incorporated marketing strategies into their ways of being the church, pitching their programs and services to prospective seekers who are well-versed in such habits of thinking. By blatantly appealing to self-interest, such tactics—no matter how well meaning—neither demonstrate our love for these seekers nor cultivate the habits of thought and action that would nourish Christian love.

Living in a culture like ours also encourages Christians to frame their understanding of the faith primarily in terms of self-interest. (What's in it for me? Plenty! Start with eternal life.) Hence, many people are "converted" less out of their sense that they are estranged from God and other people and their desire to be reconciled, but more out of a sense that they're savvy consumers, knowing a good deal when they see one. Such people, I suspect, have difficulty understanding someone like Paul, who understood that God's plans for reconciliation were cosmic in scope. Rather than being consumed with self-interest, Paul was so sorrowful and anguished over Israel's unbelief that he could wish that he "were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people" (Rom 9:3).

Finally, in a culture that encourages us to distinguish ourselves from one another by our consumer choices, where "we are what we consume," we can easily be led to believe that we are Christians simply because we are consumers of "Christian" products. Though Jesus said we would be known as his disciples by our love for one another (Jn 13:35), we often settle for distinguishing ourselves from the wider culture by being consumers of Christian music, books, concerts, seminars, T-shirts, jewelry, plaques, figurines and bumper stickers.

### Cultivating Love

Given my comments about the relationship between love and the other eight fruit of the Spirit, I hope that the remainder of this book will be understood as a guide to cultivating love. Here we will only pause to consider briefly those resources that Christians might employ to counter some of the more insidious features of life in a society permeated by market exchanges. As in each of the chapters that follow, we look first to the gathered church to see what resources it offers as we seek to cultivate the fruit of love.

*Paying attention to others.* We cannot love other people without paying attention to them. Yet the practices and virtues of the marketplace nourish a kind of indifference. To the extent that the marketplace encourages us to see each other at all, it encourages us to see each other as commodities, as objects that may be exploited for our benefit. Too often the freedom of the market-



place is translated into freedom *from each other* or freedom *to exploit each other*, all for the sake of self. But Paul tells the Galatians, "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another (Gal 5:13). If Christians are to cultivate a way of life that resists the commodification of all of life, including the commodification of our relationships with God, other people and the rest of God's creation, then there is perhaps no better place to gain a foothold than in our corporate worship.

At its best, worship schools us in the art of paying attention to others, drawing our focus away from ourselves and redirecting it toward God. We gather to worship first of all not because we desire to be blessed, or because we need our "spiritual batteries charged," or because we believe God will love us more if we "go to church." We gather first of all out of gratitude, as a response to God's prior activity. We gather to give God praise for creating and sustaining the entire cosmos and for creating us in the divine image in order that we might have communion with God and with one another. We gather to give God praise for creating a covenant people, Israel, who would be a light to the nations and through whom all nations would be blessed. We gather to give God praise for sending the Son in the person of Jesus Christ, in order that we might be reconciled to God and the rest of the cosmos. We gather to give God praise for pouring out the Spirit upon the church that we might be the body of Christ for the world.

There are, of course, many more reasons why we might gather to praise God. I hope, however, that the point is clear: in gathering to praise God as God deserves to be praised, we attempt to set aside our self-interestedness and focus our attention on the One who creates and sustains all life. Although none of us succeed completely in leaving behind our preoccupation with self, we should not thereby assume that our worship leaves us unchanged. Every deliberate attempt to pay attention to another *for the sake of the other* is a welcome reminder that all of life need not be sifted through the sieve of self-interest.

Our gathered worship might also remind us that not all relationships must be rooted in self-interested exchanges. We do not offer our praise and thanksgiving to God because God needs it. God is ceaselessly and eternally

praised by innumerable hosts whom we simply join when we lift our voices in praise and adoration. This is not to suggest, of course, that God does not take pleasure in our worship. I suspect, however, that the pleasure God takes in our worship is inseparable from its being offered freely, from its character as a gift. We do not gather to praise God with an eye toward what we will receive in return, or in order to keep God pacified for another week. God has entered into relationship with us by making us the recipients of God's boundless generosity and grace; we bring an offering of praise not as an exchange, but as a gift.

*Receiving and giving graciously.* The above reflections remind us that at the heart of Christian faith and practice is the giving of gifts. God has abundantly given to us; we respond in gratitude by offering gifts to God, and we seek to continue to be avenues of God's grace by giving gifts to one another.

This drama of gift-giving also stands at the heart of Christian worship, most visibly in that central practice of the church: the Lord's Supper. Though the name of this practice varies among Christian traditions, and though it is understood and celebrated in a variety of ways, all Christians who engage in this practice sense that the incomprehensible mystery at the heart of the Eucharist is inseparable from God's other-directed love. This meal celebrates God's love toward us in the past, empowers us for loving service in the present and serves as a foretaste of that final meal when we will celebrate together the consummation of God's reconciling work.

Thus few moments in the life of the church can compare to that moment, as enacted in the liturgy of several traditions, when the elements are presented to the people with these words: "The gifts of God for the people of God." Here we are reminded most powerfully that we are the recipients of gifts beyond measure, and so we gather with open hands, humbly receiving all that God would give to us.

Yet we also come with open hands because God's love calls us to give. From its earliest days, the Lord's Supper has been understood as a call to love our neighbors in visible and tangible ways. There is, for example, evidence in Scripture that at least some of the earliest celebrations of the Lord's Supper were combined with an *agape* or love feast (Jude 12; cf. 2 Pet 2:13). Indeed,



Paul rebuked the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:17-34) for gathering to celebrate this meal in ways that violated the very Spirit of that gathering. What were they doing? Apparently, the rich Christians were gathering to eat a private meal before the common one, as a result, there was less food to share with the poorer members of the community. This selfish and insensitive behavior not only violated the Spirit of love that stands at the center of the meal, but heightened the social and economic divisions that Christ's love was to overcome. So certain was Paul that these selfish practices were contrary to that gospel the Corinthians were called to embody, that he could insist that regardless of what they believed they were doing, they were not actually eating the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:20). It is this violation of the body that Paul has in view when a few verses later he declares that "all those who eat and drink without discerning the body"—that is, without realizing that this community is the body of Christ—"eat and drink judgment against themselves" (11:29).

Paul's words of warning are some of the most sobering in all of Scripture, for they remind us that the ways we *embody* God's love matter more than what we *say that we believe about* God's love. Or perhaps more precisely, the way we embody (or fail to embody) God's love is a sure indicator of what we actually believe than are our words. It is not enough simply to gather around the Lord's Table and mouth pious formalities about love, sacrifice and forgiveness. If these beliefs about God's love are not embodied in the very way we gather, then we would likely be better off not gathering at all (cf. Mt 5:23-24).

In sum, the Eucharist is a powerful reminder that God's grace comes not only in the form of bread and wine but also in the form of flesh and blood. Those people who gather with us to celebrate the Lord's Supper are as much the body of Christ—and hence expressions of God's love and grace—as the elements we receive. To open our hands to the one without opening our hands to the other is to do violence to the very life-giving mystery at the heart of the church's life. Thus when we hear the words "The gifts of God for the people of God," we should be prepared to receive not only these elements but also each other as God's good gifts.

*Sustaining stewardship.* The presence of social and economic divisions in

the Corinthian church reminds us how easily we allow our possessions, as well as the status associated with them, to divide us. Most of us can recall being in situations where we found ourselves uncomfortable because we sensed we didn't belong. How did we know this? By observing such things as the clothes other people were wearing, the cars they were driving, or the houses in which they were living. Whether we liked it or not, we sensed an invisible barrier that seemed to prohibit genuine interaction.

This, of course, is only one role that our material possessions play in cultures like ours. At the heart of the marketplace is the notion of ownership and possession. Each of us knows that the purpose of engaging in self-interested exchanges is to acquire those things we need and desire. Indeed, the consumer mentality in our society actually encourages us to think of our purchases as an expression of our identity: I am what I consume. Or as one recent automobile advertisement impudently intoned: "Is who you are a reflection of what you drive, or is what you drive a reflection of who you are? That depends on what you drive." This intimate link our culture encourages us to forge between one's *self* and one's *stuff* creates potential problems for Christians who believe that God has created all things and has called us to be stewards of them. How might Christian teaching on stewardship serve as a resource for reconceiving our relationship to "our stuff"? Might such teaching help us discover ways in which "our stuff" might be used as a vehicle for expressing Christian love and concern rather than as a means for division and self-indulgence?

This subject obviously deserves more than brief attention, but perhaps a few comments will foster further reflection. First, in order for the Christian concept of stewardship to function as a resource, we must remind ourselves of what it means to be a steward. Too often the concept is used as an excuse to protect our stuff: "Oh, we'd love to feed the homeless in our fellowship hall, but we're called to be good stewards of what God has given us, and all that extra traffic would wear out our new carpet too quickly." In contrast, the concept of stewardship at its best is rooted in the doctrine of creation: God created and sustains all there is. In creating us in God's image and entrusting the rest of the creation to our care, God places us in a privileged position in



creation. This privilege, however, entails not the freedom to exploit the rest of creation for our own benefit, but the responsibility to embody God's presence throughout creation.

To be a faithful steward, therefore, is always to act on *behalf* of the one who has called you to this responsibility. For this reason, our acts of stewarding should reflect what God would do if God were acting directly. Moreover, given that Christians believe that God *has* walked among us in the person of Jesus Christ, we are not wrong to imagine how he would respond in circumstances similar to ours. Thus the question we must ask ourselves repeatedly is not, "Since God has given me these resources, how do I protect them?" but "Since God has entrusted these resources to me to do with them what Jesus would do if he were here, what does acting in such a way require in this specific situation?" Because we affirm that God epitomizes other-directed love, it seems plausible that those who act as stewards of this God—and as disciples of God's son—should also act in love. For example, can we imagine Jesus living in relative luxury while those nearby go hungry?

Of course, someone might argue that this is precisely what we *do* see. After all, they might say, if God wanted to end world hunger tomorrow, then God could. Since God doesn't, why should I worry about it? This raises our final consideration: *Why* does God call us to be stewards in the first place? Doesn't God know the old adage, "If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself"? If God wants all people everywhere taken care of, why doesn't God "just do it"?

This way of thinking makes perfectly good sense as long as one is concerned primarily about the final product. If all God cared about, for example, was *that* people were fed, then presumably God might have chosen to distribute resources more equitably. But God also cares deeply about *the way* people get fed. To see why this might be the case, entertain the following thought-experiment. Imagine that you are going away for the weekend and you need to provide for your five children in your absence. You could, if all you cared about was *that* they were provided for, give each of them a large box of breakfast cereal and instruct each to take care of him or herself in your absence. But you could also make one of the children the steward of the cereal

with instructions to make sure that all were provided for, knowing that this would require the children to learn to interact with each other in ways that would be unnecessary in the fend-for-yourself strategy.

What if God has entrusted to some of us much more than we need, not as a sign of God's favor or as a "blessing" to be hoarded, but as a call to reach out to those in need that they might be provided for by the One who loves them most? It may be that too many of us have taken the large box of cereal, written a check for 10 percent of its volume to the church and then gone off to enjoy one heck of a big breakfast. Surely this is not stewardship.

### Reflection Questions and Practical Suggestions

The final section of this and subsequent chapters will invite you to think carefully about the ways in which the issues raised throughout the chapter impact your life directly. Since the purpose of this section is to enrich your imagination, not stifle it, please do not limit yourself to these few modest suggestions. When faced with a formidable task, most of us find it helpful to find someplace to start. That's what these final sections are about: starting points. My hope is that each of you will use these simple questions and suggestions as a means to a life of deeper and more profound reflection and embodiment.

□ This chapter has focused on the other-directedness of love. Reflect on the proportion of time you devote each day to yourself, your concerns and your agenda, compared with how much you devote to the needs and concerns of others. Although most of us will always be "self-centered" in this respect, we should be troubled if the needs of others *always* take a back seat to our own. Consider beginning each day by asking God to give you eyes to see the needs of others, even if this means setting aside your own agenda and preoccupations.

□ Devote some time to reflecting on your personal relationships and the ways that you view them. Have you ever found yourself evaluating an existing or potential relationship by engaging in a crude form of cost-benefit analysis, weighing the benefits and costs it offered you? Do you think relationships contracted in this way are capable of nurturing other-directed love?



Can you think of any practices you engage in that encourage you to view other people as objects for your own pleasure or benefit? Many cultural commentators have suggested that we live in a “voyeuristic culture,” that is, a culture where people derive an inordinate amount of pleasure from watching other peoples’ lives. Is it possible that much of the pleasure gained from sordid talk shows, tell-all memoirs, pornography or web cams is related to the fact that such pleasure is secured from a safe distance, without risk of human involvement? If Christians are not free to consume as entertainment another person’s troubles, body or life, then perhaps we should make a concerted effort to limit our exposure to those venues that encourage us to do precisely that.

□ Set aside some time to evaluate honestly whether our cultural habit of viewing most of life through the lens of self-interest has affected the way you view your relationship with God. Have you ever found yourself thinking of your relationship with God or the church in terms of self-interest? Have you ever evaluated these relationships by using something akin to cost-benefit analysis? For example, have you ever been tempted to think about the Christian life primarily in terms of “what’s in it for me”? Have you ever ended your relationship with a church because the “cost” of continued involvement was too high?

Most of us will likely answer yes to at least one of the questions above. Our problem, in a nutshell, is that our vision of the Christian life is far too puny. We have been called by God to be partners in God’s glorious and cosmic work of reconciliation. God is in the process of bringing healing and restoration to all of creation, and we have been called to be agents of that reconciling work. That call from God has the potential to free us from our bondage to our own visions of what life is about, visions that usually entail little more than orchestrating all of life to serve our own narrow interests. What we need is a clearer recognition that central to the salvation or wholeness that God offers us is a salvation from ourselves. God offers us a life saturated in love—in other-directedness—if we are but willing to step aside and allow God’s vision for human life to become our vision.

□ Since market-style economies are here to stay for the foreseeable future,

Christians who must function within them must find creative ways to keep their entire lives from being colonized by market-style thinking. If Christians are to continue to tell the story of God in Christ with integrity—a story that remains incomprehensible apart from the notion of “gift”—then we will need times and places in our lives where the attitudes and practices of the marketplace are kept at bay. What might we do to cultivate a different set of practices and convictions?

We might begin by working hard to keep ourselves from viewing worship as merely another exchange. We need to catch ourselves when we say things like “Well, I didn’t get anything out of *that* this morning” and realize that such a mentality reflects our bondage to viewing everything through the lens of self-interest. If we gather primarily to offer God an offering of praise and thanksgiving, then whether or not we are blessed or edified in the process will be of secondary importance.

Christians should also seek to have their friendships rooted in the gracious giving and receiving of gifts, rather than in the calculated exchange of benefits. If you find yourself, for example, devoting considerable energy to “keeping score” with your friends (How much did they spend on me for my birthday?), then you are probably neither giving nor receiving graciously. In a similar way, when someone offers you a gift, resist the urge to reciprocate immediately. Too often our acts of reciprocity are (or at least appear to be) attempts to deflect the gift originally given by transforming the situation into one of exchange.

We also need to reconsider our relationship to “our stuff.” What might happen if we began to think of “our possessions” as given to us as resources for furthering God’s reign in this place? Would this encourage us to open our eyes to the needs around us? Are we really acting in love when we see someone in need, yet save our consciences by telling ourselves that we’ve given God our obligatory tithe and so are “free” to spend *our* 90 percent on ourselves?

Do a word study on the New Testament concept of *koinōnia*. This Greek word, often translated as “fellowship” (but also as “communion,” “brotherhood” and “participation”), entails a good deal more than simply being with other people and having a good time. Indeed, there are several places in



Scripture (and in the writings of the early church) where what was implied and apparently practiced was a complete sharing of life, including the sharing of material possessions (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35). Even when the word is not explicitly employed, we see the concept at work. Thus a disciple such as Barnabas (Acts 4:36) is willing to sell a parcel of land and bring the money to the apostles in order to take care of pressing needs, not believing that his possessions are strictly "his own."

Some churches are experimenting with some creative ways of helping their members reconceive their relationship to their possessions. For example, I know of churches that maintain a database of people's stuff that they are willing to loan to other people. Some members may have only one or two items on the database, while others may have many. In each case, however, such a practice serves as an important reminder that our stuff is not our own. If we really are stewards, then we have to do everything in our power to make sure that what is done with it pleases and furthers the purposes of the One to whom it all belongs. Moreover, such a practice brings us into relationship with one another in ways that are not necessary when we each have our own stuff.

Finally, we should seek out opportunities to give without expectation of return. For example, those of us who are able should consider *donating* our blood. It's a simple gesture, yet in addition to helping another human being, it may also serve as a reminder that we need spaces in our lives that operate outside the market. There are very few spaces left in our culture that are not framed by self-interested exchanges; Christians should be grateful for those few that remain and should joyfully support them. How tragic it would be if we were known as the people who on Sundays celebrate the new life we have received through the gift of Christ's blood and who then turn around on Monday and sell our blood for a profit to a brother or sister in need.

*I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Eph 3:16-17)*

## THREE

### Cultivating Joy in the Midst of Manufactured Desire

*My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (Jn 15:8-11)*

*When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (Jn 16:21-22)*

**T**he memory remains so vivid that it could have happened yesterday. Kim and I were in the combination labor and delivery room of our local hospital, anxiously awaiting and painfully aiding the arrival of our first son. I felt intensely helpless, coaching Kim to breathe through the intense pain of the contractions and then to rest between them. Never before had I seen my wife in such agony; her iron grip on my left hand during the contractions was a periodic reminder that our roles in this unfolding miracle were terribly unequal. At one point I actually had to remove my sterling silver wedding band, realizing only later that Kim's clasp on my hand had cracked it.

Yet this is not what either of us remembers most vividly. Kim tells me that she can remember the pain, but only with effort. What she remembers most