

Words of Love



*A Healing Journey
with the Ten Commandments*

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INTRODUCTION



In the summer of 2003, perched alone in a small cabin overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in Nova Scotia, I found myself cross-legged on a scratchy plaid sofa eating macaroni and cheese with cherry tomatoes and watching the evening news. The only station that I could get on the rabbit-eared TV set was an NBC affiliate out of Boston. I was spending a month there on writing leave from my church.

Most days, I rose early and sat on my porch overlooking the sandy beach, sipping coffee and eating Oreo cookies. All morning I read, pondered, took notes, and hoped something profound would occur to me. This particular day, I had given up hope of the profound insight and walked to the little general store in town to buy something for supper, and to look over the dwindling collection of DVDs available for rental. All that was left was a copy of the Mel Gibson flick, *What Women Want*—in German with English subtitles, no less! So, armed with a box of mac and cheese, the tomatoes, a small carton of milk, and *Was Frauen Wollen*, I headed back to my cabin just in time for the nightly news.

I clicked on the TV to see a wild image of the state capital in my home state of Alabama, and what appeared to be a riot. The then-chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court

had defied a federal court order to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments from the capitol rotunda to an art and history room down the hall. On the steps of the capitol, the same steps upon which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the leaders of the civil rights movement had stood and prayed after the long and bloody voting rights march from Selma, throngs of people gathered with signs and shaking fists. Police tried to intervene. At one point, a well-dressed, middle-aged man threw himself on the monument, screaming viciously, “You will not remove my God!”

I was shocked, horrified really. It was, after all, a monument, not God. And wasn't there something written on that very monument about idols anyway? As I sat mesmerized, searching the crowd in the fervent hope that none of my parishioners were there being hauled off in shackles, I began to wonder about that man. It was not so much about his politics and ideology that I wondered. That I recognized. It was his passion that captivated me, the fierceness of it, the utter wildness of his determination to preserve those words on that stone. As I sat there pondering, long after the segment ended, I felt a small question begin to surface in my heart. “Are you, Eugenia, wild for the Word?” That little moment led me to a years-long study of the Ten Commandments and resulted in *Love Carved in Stone: A Fresh Look at the Ten Commandments*, the Horizons Bible study for 2019–2020.

During those years of study and pondering, I led many retreats on the Ten Commandments. Through those retreats and my time traveling the country introducing *Love Carved in Stone*, I continued to learn more and more about the powerful emotions that a deep consideration of the Ten Commandments often engender. I learned that in addition to being a brief outline of basic morality, in addition to being a template for life in community, the Ten Commandments are also a powerful outpouring of God's love for our

personal, familial, and societal transformation. It is to that aspect of the Ten Commandments that I turn in this book.

Before we approach the meat of this volume, a few basics will be important for you to master. First of all, the Ten Commandments appear in two different places and forms in the Bible: Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. In most translations, the original text is translated identically into English. In Hebrew, however, there are some differences. Each of those differences offers us a glimpse into a nuance of the text's meaning. I will point those out as we go along.

Second, the text itself does not contain the word "commandment." It appears in our English translations to bracket the text, but it is not in the text itself. The "commandments" are simply called "words" or "utterances." This is very important. It suggests that the Commandments are not simply a list of moral dos and don'ts. They are the *speech* of God. We know from even a cursory reading of Scripture, that God's speech is powerful. It does things. It brings things into being. Think about the creation narratives in Genesis. "And God *said* . . . and it was so." God creates through speech, through words, through utterances.

We can think of the words of God as pure divine energy, creating everything that is. God's speech is like the divine womb in which everything takes shape and out of which everything is born. In this way, when talking about Jesus as the Word of God in flesh we see him as the embodiment of divine life and energy that re-creates that which we ourselves broke or debased.

Throughout this book, I refer to the Commandments as the Words. I do this intentionally because changing our language to reflect the biblical writer's language allows spaces to open up in our sometimes staid interpretations of these familiar words. I also do it because the word "commandment" can make it seem that God is simply telling us what to do and what not to do. It is not that simple. In

the Ten Words, God is, in the very speaking of the Words, bringing them into being in our lives and community. We are not left with our own power and determination alone to do the right thing. God combines God's power and essence with our desire to do right and brings an entirely new way of life into being.

Some people resist this, and they can get quite testy about it. To use Word rather than commandment feels to them like it takes away the power of the text, making it a list of suggestions from which we can pick and choose to suit ourselves and our times. Nothing could be further from the truth! To use the biblical language points us to a power far greater than our own. Just as God spoke creation into being, in these Words, God speaks a new community into being. It is a community into which we are invited to join God and each other for the transformation of our own lives and the world.

Third, the early manuscripts of Scripture do not have verse numbers, nor are they divided into chapters. Those conveniences came to us much later. The Ten Words are not numbered, nor are they easily divided. Throughout the centuries, scholars have debated the exact number of the Words and where the divisions fall. Some suggest that what we think of as the first Word is not so much a command as a statement of reality and so combine the first and second Words into one. Some divide the final Word into two. There is no real right or wrong here. For our purposes in this book, I use the traditional Reformed divisions. The substance does not change with the numbering.

Finally, over the years of working with this text in groups and retreat settings, I've found that many of us carry a lot of baggage and pain around the Ten Words. Sometimes that manifests in a feeling of moral guilt at having violated them. Sometimes it is deeper than that. Sometimes it has to do with wounds we have suffered due to brokenness in

families or prejudices in society. The Ten Words have a sacred way of bringing those wounds to the surface and at the same time offering healing for them. Such is the power of God's speech. It is to this healing journey that we turn in this book.

CHAPTER 1



GREETING THE GOD OF LOVE

Addressing Hurtful Views of God

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

Exodus 20:1–3

Several years after my experience in Nova Scotia, I moved from my home in Birmingham, Alabama, to the central coast of California. In those intervening years, I went through a very painful divorce. I felt that failure, as my dad used to say, like a dead weight sinker. I was fifty years old and had a string of failed relationships with men in that half century. I had had a wonderful ministry during all that time, amazingly enough, due to the grace of God alone. Still, I was flailing around internally. I knew clearly who I was as a pastor. I knew my gifts for ministry and many of my limitations. I was full of confidence in that arena. But at home, alone, it was different. During the day, when I was doing my work, I was focused and content. At night, when

the meetings were done, when the to do list was as complete as it was going to get, then, I was restless and frightened. I felt guilty and lonely and like something essential had been lost, amputated, and I could no longer dance.

So, I took a geographic cure, packed up my beautiful loft in downtown Birmingham, said good-bye to a church I adored, and headed west to a little cottage half a block from the Pacific Coast. I worked part-time at a neighboring church and spent the rest of my days working on a book project on the first millennium women martyrs, mystics, and reformers.

After I had been in California a short time, I met the man who is now my husband. Robbie grew up in New York and came to California immediately after returning from his tour of duty in Vietnam. He married and raised a family. He had been divorced for more than ten years when we met, I for only two. He was over it. I was not. But he sure was cute, blue eyes, infectious grin, and the gentlest soul I've ever known. I remember thinking, "Well, what can it hurt to go out to dinner with him?" So, I did, and we began to see each other regularly.

The problem came about a year and a half into our relationship, when he wanted to get married. I did not. I was terrified, certain that I was not good at it and never wanted to go there again. He asked. I said no. Things went on as they had before. About three months later, he asked again. I said no again. Another three months passed. Same thing. Then another three.

One day, we were sitting on a bench by the ocean sharing a sandwich. The sky was bright blue, and the waves crashed powerfully on the rocky coast. Otters played. Herons fished. He asked again. I could feel myself backing up on the bench. He felt it too. Then, he took my face in both of his hands. "Genie," he said. "I am not that other guy. I'm *your guy* and you are safe with me." Now, Robbie

is quick to say that I still turned him down that day. But it was a turning point. We were married within the year.

Why do I begin a conversation about the First Word with that story? Because that is how God begins the story, with a powerful declaration of love, of a love that changes everything. Much like a suitor in former times might declare intentions to a dearly loved one, God in the beginning of this new beginning, declares God's self to us. *I am your God.*

Our Divine Love Story

Love, for humans, always has a history. It sometimes hits in a flood of endorphins. Often, though, it hums into our lives like a barely heard vibration of the soul, small experience by small experience. Both of these dynamics can be seen in our love story with God in Scripture.

By the time that Moses makes his trek to the holy mountain to get advice from God about what to do with his unruly, wilderness-weary people, the people of Israel had a centuries-long history of both joy and disappointment in their relationship with God.

Jealousy in the family of Jacob fractured the family and led to Joseph winding up in prison, and then in power in Egypt. Reconciliation between the twelve brothers allowed the family to reunite there and to prosper. But that was long ago. As the people grew in numbers and influence, a new Pharaoh arose who did not remember the old relationships and who saw in the people only what he could get out of them. They became units of productivity and eventually slaves. Life was hard. Scholars disagree about how long this situation lasted. It is clear, in any case, that it lasted for generations.

Moses was born into the harshness of that life of oppression. As is so often the case, oppressors are easily threatened

and murder often follows. Pharaoh decided that the sheer numbers of the Hebrew people posed a demographic shift that was a threat to his power. So, he ordered the male children of the Hebrews to be executed. This edict was both diabolical and short-sighted. He was, after all, eliminating his future work force. Still, it is not unheard of in human history for unscrupulous leaders, when frightened, to do cruel things that, in the long run, are not even in their own self-interest.

God is always present and working in circumstances of oppression, even when the evidence is not clear in the moment. In Moses' case, God was at work through the determination, wits, and courage of a remarkable group of women: his mother, sister, two amazing midwives, and a compassionate princess. Moses was spared and grew up in the palace itself as the child of the Egyptian princess.

As a young adult, the streams of Moses' own history came together in another tragedy that changed the trajectory of his life. He saw an Egyptian soldier brutally beating a Hebrew slave. Moses, overcome with rage, killed the soldier. Once he realized what he had done, he buried the soldier in the sand and fled the city for a new life in the wilderness. There he met his wife and went to work for his father-in-law. It was while doing that work that Moses was met with the voice of God calling out to him from a burning bush.

God had work for Moses to do. God wanted him to go back to Egypt, back to the home he had fled in fear, and tell Pharaoh to set the people free. Moses was stunned and reluctant. To do what God desired, he would have to face his past. He would have to go back to the families he had left behind. He would have to risk the consequences of facing his lost loves, his worst failures, and his own murderous impulses. That is the path to transformation for many of us. Still, it is more amazing that he agreed than that he resisted.

In this encounter with the voice of God in the burning bush, Moses made an audacious request. He asked for the gift of God's name. We will talk about the importance of the name in chapter 3, however, at this point, it is important to remember that God said yes to this request and gave Moses the divine name, YHWH (vocalized, when appropriate, as Yahweh). It means *being* itself—"I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14).

Rabbi Rachel Mikva, in *Broken Tablets: Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves*, shares that the early rabbis and scholars of Torah found the word YHWH to be an ecstasy in itself.¹ To hear the word whispered is to be transported out of oneself into the realm of perfect love.

This is how God begins the Ten Words. *I am* (YHWH) yours. Like Robbie taking my face in his hands, the story turns on love. It is God's love that gives us the courage to confront the past, to stand up to the powers, and to move into a different way of life.

Love Is a Journey

Moses, despite his fear and reluctance, did return to Egypt and, by the power of God, he did lead the people out. By the time Moses heads up Mount Sinai for help from God, the people have been in the wilderness for many years. They had, in their opinion, as the old saying goes, traded a headache for an upset stomach. They found fault with nearly everything that God tried to do for them on their journey. Freedom was harder than they thought. So hard that they even began to view slavery in Egypt through rose-colored glasses. At least, they reminisced, we had meat to eat. And weren't the onions in Egypt grand? To ease their hunger and calm their spirits, God sent bread from heaven and quails to eat. Rather than trust God for daily provision,

they hoarded what they came to think of as *their* resources and made themselves sick on it.

Not only are the people moaning, griping, and complaining, enemies are finding them even in the wilderness. After a battle with the Amalekites, Moses sends his wife, Zipporah, and their two sons back to her father, Jethro. When they return to the wilderness for a visit, they find Moses completely exhausted from sitting as a judge and arbiter of all of the complaints of the people. Then they come to Sinai.

That is the context for the gift of the Ten Words. Moses is worn out. The people have lost vision. God has so much more for them and us than that. When Moses ascends the mountain, breaks through the clouds and mists, what he finds is more remarkable than he could have dreamed. In the midst of the clouds of power and holiness lies a God who says, “I am yours.”

We, too, may know what it is like to find ourselves stuck in places we never intended to stay. We know what it is like to wish for things to go back to the way they were, even while we rewrite that old history to make it seem better than it was. We know what it is like to dismiss or despise the gifts God gives us because they are not the ones we thought we wanted. We know what it is like to feel unsure that God will be there for us each and every day, and so we hoard what resources we are given until they make us sick—literally or spiritually. We know what it is like to want to please God and to also wonder if God is trustworthy at the same time. The wilderness time is not foreign to us.

It is astounding that it is into those times of fear, fatigue, and disillusionment that God moves and says, “I am yours. I belong to you. I declare myself yours.” God’s self-giving love is the container, a frame within which the Ten Words and all of life are to be understood.

God's love is more, however than a simple frame. It is, perhaps, a *mandorla*. A mandorla is an ancient sacred symbol that gained prominence in Christian art in the Middle Ages. It is that almond shape that is created when two circles intersect. Mandorlas invite us to look deeply through them at those moments when the human and the divine, the mundane and the sacred, intersect. It is the mandorla that holds everything within it together. It provides a boundary, although a mysterious one, and is the context for all that is pictured within it.

Divine Love holds the pieces of life together. Divine Love makes the mundane sacred. Divine Love holds the Ten Words together as one great vision of human and divine life intersecting. Nothing about the Ten Words will be ultimately transformative until we understand that it begins with love, ends with love, and is framed with love. Everything else distorts.

Love Frees

Not only does God declare Godself to us, and in so doing make the new and special relationship a reality, God immediately, upon making that declaration, reminds us of who God really is. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2).

What must Moses have thought? Did he think that God was simply clarifying which god he was speaking with, lest Moses confuse God with some other divine being that he had heard of, or perhaps wished for, over the years? Or was God, as I believe, reminding Moses of the central characteristic of God for us?

God begins this divine encounter by declaring Godself to us and reminding us that God is the one who sets us free.

God is not a god like Pharaoh, whose entire goal is to be worshiped, served, and enriched. Divine Being, Divine Love, is devoted to setting the beloved free from every bondage that keeps us from the life of promised blessing for which we were created. The freedom Divine Love declares is not just *from* something. It is also *to* something. It is freedom into love, and the resulting life of love, that the Words describe.

In saying that God is the one who brought us out of slavery, God reminds us that what God did for the Hebrew people long ago, God is still doing right here and right now. The organizing intention of Divine Love is always liberation. That liberation mirrors God's own freedom and Jesus' central purpose. In Galatians 5:1, Paul reminds us that it was for freedom that Christ set us free.

How is it that over the centuries so many of us have come to see God differently from that? When presented with God reaching into the muck and mess of human life and offering love and freedom, how is it that we so often choose to focus on God as fierce and disappointed with us instead? Why? Perhaps that, too, has a long history.

Jonathan Edwards, the British colonial pastor and theologian of the Great Awakening in mid-eighteenth century New England, wrote a widely distributed sermon called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." This sermon was filled with images of hell and God's fury with human recalcitrance. It is powerful stuff and a telling glimpse into the theology of God's vengeance as motivation for repentance and change. The image of sinners being dangled by a fierce God over the pits of hell has stuck in our psyches more than we might imagine, leaving us often with a cowering approach to God, if we dare approach at all.

It is not just the fiery rhetoric of the pulpit. Sometimes our own halting reading of Scripture itself has left us wary of the quest to please God. Sometimes it leaves us weary of the quest to even *like* God.

A colleague told me recently of an incident with an acquaintance who contacted her with a poignant question: "How do I read the Bible without being furious with God?" It can be hard work to excavate the God who holds our faces and breathily says, "I'm yours" from the harsh and patriarchal culture through which that revelation comes to us even now.

A few years ago, when I was still pastor in California, Robbie and I went to a wine-tasting event at a local winery. It was my favorite winery, situated on the beautiful sloping hills from which we could watch the fog roll in off the Pacific. This particular evening, I was seated next to a woman who looked familiar to me, although I couldn't place her. As it turned out, she had moved to the Central Coast a few years before from the Midwest, where she had been an active leader in her church. She had visited our church several times and then disappeared. I asked her if she had found a church home. "No," she said. "I liked your church a lot, but I find that I can no longer be associated with what the word Christian has come to mean." Wow. I was speechless. Sometimes, it is those who seek to represent or interpret God who make God either incomprehensible or frightening. People come to think that God hates and refuses to welcome those that the church seems to hate, disregard, or refuse to welcome.

Perhaps even more poignantly, some of us have difficulty imagining ourselves being embraced by Divine Love because of the overemphasis on male parental images of God. It is little wonder that some of us view God through the experiences we have had of maleness and privilege. If those experiences have been largely generous and loving, we tend to see God in the same way. If they have been distant, brutal, or repressive, we see God in that way. If our experiences of male authority have been largely silent, absent, or unreachable, we tend to see God in that way.

My senior year in seminary, I took a practicum class in spiritual direction. Class members volunteered as directees so that we could learn from experience. My directee was a second career man who had worked for twenty years in government. He talked beautifully about his faith in Jesus but when it came to talking about God as Father, he shut down completely. He told me about the hours he had spent as a child locked in a closet by his father, who angrily stood outside the door telling him what a disappointment he was and how he wished he had never been born. For my directee, using male parental language about God was so triggering that he found it hard to even lead the Lord's Prayer.

The rich maternal images of God in Scripture can help us to a degree. Even those, however, are subject to our own experiences. Because all we truly understand in this world we understand in the realm of human experience, it is easy to project our experiences onto God, especially when the God of Scripture chooses to come to us in skin and bone in Jesus.

If our experience of gender identity doesn't fit overwhelming cultural norms, it can be even more complicated to embrace or feel the embrace of a God who is presented to us in stereotypically gendered ways. That is why, in so far as it is practical in English, I avoid gendered pronouns for God at all.

Experiencing Divine Love in Each Other

When I was in college and active in our campus church and ministry, somehow I was put in charge of vacation Bible school. I was an only child who had always lived in an adult world and did not even know how to change a diaper. Nevertheless, I was still young enough, and cocky enough, to feel invincible, so I took on the challenge. I was able to coerce one of my friends, an extraordinarily gifted

poet who later became an Episcopal priest, to teach the elementary school group. Everything went beautifully the first day. And the second.

On the third day, my friend Louie came out of his classroom at snack time looking stricken. All the color had drained from his usually ruddy complexion. He looked like a man headed to the gallows. He held in his hand a small stack of papers on which the children had colored pictures.

“What happened?” I asked. Quietly he handed me the papers and said, “We were studying Moses going up Mount Sinai and I asked them to draw a picture of what they thought God looked like.”

I flipped through the pages. Each page contained a variation of the same image: God with long brown hair, a ruddy complexion, wire-rimmed spectacles and a tie-dyed T-shirt. Each child had drawn Louie. Mercifully, that gentle soul did, in my opinion, point them to a genuine and tender glimpse of the God of Love, but Louie was horrified. It was all I could do to get him to complete the week, so undone was he.

It is indeed humbling to realize how much of what we experience we project onto God. Often, we project our parental pain or comfort onto God. When I was a young child, my father used to come into my room at bedtime for nighttime prayers. He sat at the foot of my bed and taught me how to fold my hands, palms together and fingers pointed toward heaven, with his big hands covering my own. He always asked me three questions to guide our prayer time. “Does anything hurt? Who are you concerned about? Does anyone you know need help?” Then we prayed. As I grew, he taught me the Lord’s Prayer and even the Ten Commandments on my fingers. The image of a loving, comforting, guiding father has always been easy for me. Not so for many of us.

Years ago, I heard United Methodist pastor John Sumwalt tell a story about an experience he had one Sunday.

There was a young family in his church at the time. They were regulars. The father, mother, and two small children, sat together near the front of the sanctuary, close to the pulpit. One Sunday, as he preached, John noticed that the father was becoming agitated. At one point, the young man got up and fled down the center aisle of the church, leaving his family embarrassed and confused.

When the man got outside, he was so upset and chagrined that he walked home. He had no idea why he had done what he did. Later that afternoon, he and his wife took a walk to try to sort out what had happened. No luck. She suggested that he might go and speak with the pastor to see if any light could be shed. He agreed and made an appointment for the next day.

When he arrived at the pastor's office, after profuse apologies, the two began to try to understand what happened. John asked the man to tell him what he remembered of the service before he left. He remembered a lot. He remembered the hymns sung and the prayer concerns offered. He remembered the Old Testament lesson but could not recall the Gospel lesson. John picked up his Bible and read that lesson. It was the story of Jesus' baptism. When he got to the end of the passage and read "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased (Matt. 3:17)," the young man began to shake and burst into tears. "That is always what I longed to hear from my own father," he said through heaving sobs.

For those with painful parental relationships, we can tend to think that God thinks of us as exactly what we think our own parents think of us. More subtly though, we can come to think that God thinks of us as what we think of ourselves. If we have come to a place where we are content with ourselves, appreciate our good qualities, and even recognize the teaching role of our deficits, then we tend to see God as content with us, appreciative of our efforts, and lovingly teaching us to heal through our failures.

However, if we see ourselves as an amalgamation of disappointments and failures, held together by little more than habit and skin, we can find it difficult to cut through that pain to get to God at all. We come to think that God views us through the same filters with which we judge ourselves.

In that case, it can be hard to imagine the love of God for us because we cannot imagine ourselves as loveable or worthy. We may go through the motions of faith, hedging our bets against hell, or hoping for a razzle dazzle miracle that will, in one moment, change our view and heal our hurts, but even that can feel like a sham. If we stay in a place of self-loathing long enough, faith and its practice, and maybe even God, become shallow and transactional at best, shame-filled and numbing at worst.

When God Seems Absent

Sometimes we have difficulty receiving God's love simply because we cannot *feel* God's presence or God seems unresponsive to our prayers or needs. There are times when God's presence is shockingly real. It knocks us to our knees or overwhelms us to tears. It can come in an experience of beauty, an insight, the taste of the sacrament. It can come in the flash of a word of comfort or the understanding eyes of a friend or colleague.

There are many other times when God can seem absent. We knock on heaven's door until our knuckles bleed and receive no answering embrace, just an aching void. We can't understand why God is not helping us. The feeling of abandonment by God can be devastating.

A number of years ago, I had surgery to repair damage to my neck caused by an automobile accident. The surgery was routine. All seemed to go well. I was due to be released from the hospital on a Saturday, but when the surgeon

made his rounds to see me, he decided to keep me another night. I just “didn’t look right.” Later that day, I began to have trouble breathing. I called for help from the nurses’ station. They came with a breathing treatment for my asthma. That was not the problem. My breathing became so labored and desperate, that the nursing staff became concerned. Just before I lost consciousness, I heard the nurse say, “Call the code. We are losing her.” Then all went to blackness. It was a horrible, horrible feeling of utter fear and aloneness.

I was whisked back into surgery where a bleed was discovered and repaired. Because I couldn’t tend to myself for the first two months of recovery, I went home to my parents. That period was a true dark night of the soul. The experience of the code, and the sense of abandonment I had in that moment, consumed me. I was so angry, not that it had happened, but that I hadn’t felt God’s presence in it. I had had other near-death experiences that had seemed to be infused with light and presence. But this one was truly awful. The more I thought about it, the angrier and more depressed I got. Why wasn’t I met by the light? Why didn’t an angel come for me? Was it all just a big joke?

My father recognized that I was struggling. One evening he came into my room and sat at the foot of the bed, just like he had all those evenings in my childhood when he was teaching me to pray. He asked me what was wrong. The whole story flooded out of me with all the outrage of a child. I felt about five years old. He listened without comment until I was spent. Then he said, “Well, what makes you think you are better than Jesus?”

This truly infuriated me, and I huffed, “What do you mean?” He said, “As I recall, when Jesus was on the cross he felt abandoned, too. He cried out to his Father, ‘Why have you abandoned me?’ Maybe that is just part of life.”

With those words, something broke open in me. The dark pain seemed to vanish in a breath. I thought how honored I was to have shared that experience with Jesus. I know that sounds pietistic and peculiar, but it happened. I realized then that experiences of absence can be crucial parts of the fullness of human life. For those of us who are Christians, we believe that God chose to come to us in flesh and experienced all things with us, not only to save us from sin and death, but to show us the fullness of life. When I felt that God had abandoned me at the point of death, I was undone. When I realized that God in Christ had had the same experience, that it was just part of human life itself, I was reborn. Love and intimacy can come in many ways, even in what feels like absence.

To submit to the inner transformation of the Words requires some version of the fundamental struggle that Jesus underwent in Gethsemane. With the cross looming, he asked to be spared. In his anguish he finally came to a moment when he said to God, “nevertheless,” not my will but yours be done. Even if Divine Love takes us to the garden of betrayal, to the time of dashed expectations, to the cross of abandonment, it is always on the way to new life. If we want to enter into a healing journey with the Words, then we will have to overcome our habitual resistance to transformation’s ways with our own “nevertheless.” Until then the Words remain either chains to resent, quaint admonitions to ignore, or else weapons with which to bludgeon others to make ourselves feel righteous.

Sometimes we struggle with Divine Love because, if we can conceptualize love at all in our wounded state, it is conditional at best. The problem with that view is that there is no such thing as conditional love. Conditions are just blocks that we put up to giving and receiving love. They may sometimes be necessary, for example, to protect

ourselves from toxic relationships and danger, but they are still blocks. God does not block.

The beginning of the Ten Words tells us that God's love is not conditional. Our lives and choices can certainly throw up blocks to our living in the vastness of God's freeing love, but that is us and not God. Only as we learn to love and be loved can we approach anything like freedom.

Conclusion

When we release and sink into the First Word, the change in us is profound and the other Words naturally flow. They become an expression of who we truly are because of who God truly is. This does not mean that we will never fail, that we will never forget who and whose we are. It just means that Divine Love and freedom daily become a more settled truth in us and less a matter up entirely to our wills. When we return the embrace, it becomes an easier and shorter trip to come home.

The Ten Words begin with profound, nearly unimaginable, love and self-giving on God's part. They begin with a call to remember that God longs for nothing more than to set us free from any bondage or pain. In order for that to happen, sometimes we must heal our relationship with God and with ourselves. Then we can turn to and deal with those things that we have looked to for love and help that can never actually deliver. That is the work of the Second Word.



Spiritual Practice: Addressing Hurtful Views of God

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' first instruction to the people is the Greek word *metanoete*, "repent." We often

think that it is a synonym for remorse. We think it means to feel sorry for a moral failing or an immoral action. To repent, for us, is to say, "I'm sorry." With this understanding it is perfectly possible to be sorry for something and to change nothing.

The word that Jesus uses is much bigger than that. *Metanoeite* means to have a fundamental change of mind, world view, or way of processing things. It means to change and go another way.

Repentance, primal change, is always deliberate. We choose, by the grace of God, to think different thoughts. If we find ourselves thinking, "I'm old, fat, and unlovable," then we can choose to stop in the midst of that thought and replace it with another thought such as "I'm wise, creative, and beloved of God." Even if the new thought seems ridiculous or doesn't "feel" true, we can do it anyway. It is especially effective to speak the new thought out loud. As we do that, just as God did in creation and in the Ten Words, we begin to create a new reality.

Obviously, saying something is so does not make it automatically a reality if it defies the laws of physics. If I am 66 years old, I can't say out loud that I am 22 and have my physical body obey. What I can say is "I am strong, resilient, and powerful." Before I know it, my choices and my circumstances will begin to align with that truth. We change ourselves and we change the world with how we choose to think about it.

The easiest and most profound way to start this *metanoete* practice is to reframe your thoughts with gratitude. For example, if you are struggling to overcome an unhealthy habit, you might begin by noticing all of the healthy habits you do have. If you can't seem to shake a pervading sadness or if grief and loss are consuming you, try to make a list each day of five blessings. Some days we can just write "I made it through" five times.

Try to practice awakening to the small graces with which each day is filled, a warm cup of tea, a nuzzle from a beloved pet, a full moon, and a sky full of stars. Just choosing to notice those blessings gives you a measure of power and pushes, for a split second, other more painful thoughts to the periphery. We will return to gratitude practice again and again as we make our healing journey with the Ten Words.

Today, in whatever circumstance or challenge you face, choose to repeat to yourself: *God loves me and sets me free.* With that repetition, over time, you will find that internal shifts begin to happen and healing will take place.

Questions for Personal and Group Reflection

1. At some point in life, did you learn that love was outside of you, somehow owned or controlled by others and meted out by the other's pleasure or displeasure? Reflect for a moment on how that happened.
2. Was the image of God's fierce anger used to control you? Was the fear of hell used to scare you into domesticity, scare you into faith and commitment? If so, what was the result?
3. Why do you think this pain around love persists for you?
4. What do you need in order to see Divine Love as the mandorla around the Ten Words, and around your own life?
5. From what do you need to be freed? From whose voice do you need to be set free?