

The old man hurried to the ringing telephone.

He was eager to hear the news.

On the other line was the voice he knew better than his own soul, the voice of his partner, his wife for more than half a century.

She had been away for what seemed like forever, the longest they had ever been apart since they met, almost an entire month.

She had been staying with their granddaughter in the middle of the turmoil.

The separation was heading for divorce after the violence had spiraled out of control.

The great grandchildren were young and scared and had no one to look after them since the money was gone and their mother suddenly had to look for work.

Her daughter couldn't be bothered, and there was one sad reason or another why no one else in the family could come in and help.

It had to be her, so she bought the plane ticket and swallowed her fears and flew down to be there and help.

She would finally be coming home tomorrow, and he was so happy to almost have her back, and surely she was relieved to be returning too, but still there was a sadness in her voice, a poignancy, a worry mixed with longing.

"I really love them," she sighed, even though he already knew it well from the length of her stay and the sound of her voice.

"I want so badly for there to be peace in this family," she continued, beginning to choke up, breathing heavily from exasperation as much as physical fatigue.

"I love these children as much I love our own," she said, and she told him in detail how dear they are, how sweet and open and vulnerable and loving they are, how susceptible they are to whatever influence will become most powerful in their life.

She considered whether to bring them to live with them, but no, not now, not just yet.

He listened as she told him stories and recounted conversations, the wisdom she had shared, the advice she had offered from the pages of their own long love story.

He momentarily forgot about his excitement to see her the next day as his heart ached for the beloved ones she would now be leaving behind.

Had her trip done enough?

What would become of this young family in the throes of chaos and uncertainty?

What would happen to the children, and someday to their children...with such a pattern of brokenness and pain across the family, what would become of the generations still to come?

She cannot make their choices or live their lives for them.

If only she could somehow share the depth of old, strong, beautiful love between that she shared with the voice on the phone, the wise and bottomless love that had weathered so much and grown stronger for it.

If only she could give them *that*.

She had given them a glimpse of it, a taste, as much as she could in a short time, as much as they could receive, and now that it was time to return, she hoped it would be enough.

"I hope," she said to him finally, *that the love with which you have loved me may be in them.*

Jesus returned home the next day, of course, and it hasn't been the same since.

His mediated presence in bread and wine and water has been like a voice over the phone, comforting and wise, but distant, and his beloved, dysfunctional church has ached for his return ever since.

It helps us, though, to replay that conversation he had in prayer the night before he left, which we are privileged to overhear.

His words carry a depth and a tenderness we can barely begin to fathom, the exchange of souls that have loved one another since *before the foundation of the world*...yet they are also simple enough for us to understand.

He wants for us what he and the Father have--the same, sweet, old-married-couple unity and understanding and intimacy and love.

He wants us to be one: with him, with his beloved Father, with one another.

It breaks his beautiful old heart to hear about the preschool child who is not baptized because there are two strong Christian traditions in her household which do not recognize the validity of one another.

It breaks the Father's heart to know that family members refuse to celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb together until they can hammer out prenuptial agreements between themselves.

It confuses and saddens God that we pervert a gift into a goal, a grace freely given into an impossible work, God's overflowing heart into in our bureaucratic headache.

We have indeed received Jesus' glory and then cheapened it into a religious commodity.

We have taken grace for granted, then turned around and hoarded it, protecting it with baptized prejudices like theology and worship style and judgment masked as morality.

If only we could all be one, as they are one, and we could know and accept that endless yet ever expanding love that has been shared since *before the foundation of the world*.

Therein, of course, lies the key for us.

The love between the Father and the Son has been around more than just a long time; it predates time, and will outlast it.

Time itself is a product of that love, as is the world that operates on it.

This is because the love within God, this deep intimacy of Father and Son, is too large for any relationship to contain, even in the vastness of heaven.

The love God shares, the love God is, God gives away--not partially, but completely.

It gives birth to creation and it dies on a cross.

It invents time and it delivers eternity.

All the glory, all the wisdom, all the love is shared, given away, given to us.

And we may be eager to receive it, but we are reluctant to share it.

We see the cross and lack the courage to be so perilously generous.

We might spend an hour or two a week at church--I said *might*--but to invest more time on our faith life than on our TV or internet consumption feels far-fetched.

We might give away ten percent--I said *might*--but we are not so sure about laying aside our agendas, our rules, our standards, our precious preferences and prejudices.

We would rather clutch our individuality than our oneness, our distinct identity as Lutherans or liturgists or liberals or Americans or whatever we claim for ourselves than our connection to others who differ from us except that they too are the beloved held in Jesus' prayers.

And so Jesus not only prays for us but also for those who will get their skewed idea about who God is from watching the wayward likes of us.

Can we, will we ever grow into this glorious love?

He hopes, he prays, that somehow *the love with which you have loved me may be in them.*
And now, he sits at home, still holding his beloved's hand after all these years, hoping that his trip here accomplished enough.