

Rolheiser: An alternate expression of love and trust

"More tortuous than all else is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it."

The prophet Jeremiah wrote those words more than 25 hundred years ago and anyone who struggles with the complexities of love and human relationships will soon enough know of what he speaks.

Who indeed can understand the human heart, given some of the curious and cruel ways we sometimes have of expressing love. For instance, Nadia Bolz-Weber shares something we all have a propensity for: "Inevitably, when I can't harm the people who harmed me, I just end up harming the people who love me." How true.

When we've been hurt most every instinct in us screams for retaliation; but, most times, it's not possible, nor safe, to retaliate against the persons who hurt us. Or, perhaps we aren't even clear as to who hurt us. So, needing to lash out at someone, we lash out where it's safe to do so, namely, at those whom we trust will absorb it, at those with whom we feel secure enough to do this. We lash out at them because we know they won't retaliate.

Simply put, sometimes we need to be really angry at someone and since we are unable to vent that anger on the person or persons responsible for it we vent on someone whom we unconsciously trust will safely accept it.

If you're a loving parent, a faithful spouse, a trusted friend, a true counsellor, a good minister, or even just someone who with integrity officially represents a moral agency or a church it can be good to know this.

Otherwise it's too easy to misread some of the anger and recrimination that will come your way and take it too-personally and not for what it really is. When someone whom you've loved is angry at you it's hard to recognize and accept that you're probably the object of that anger even though you aren't the cause of it, but rather are the one safe place where this person can lash out without fear of retaliation and have his or her bitterness absorbed.

If you don't grasp the peculiar dynamics of love that are at play here you will inevitably take this too-personally, be torn up inside, lament its injustice, and struggle to carry it with the love that's unconsciously being asked for.

But this can be very hard to accept, even when we understand why it's happening. This kind of love demands an almost inhuman strength. For example, as Christians we have a special admiration for Jesus' mother as we imagine what she must have felt as she stood beneath the cross, watching her son, goodness

and innocence itself, suffer a brute, violent injustice.

Not to lessen in any way the pain that she would have been feeling then, standing helplessly as she did in that awful injustice, she did have the consolation of knowing that her son loved her deeply.

Her pain would have been excruciating, as would be the pain of any mother in that situation, but her pain had a certain (dare I use the phrase) "cleanliness" about it. She was free to fully and openly empathize with her son, knowing that his love was giving her permission to feel what she felt.

But many is the loving mother, loving father, a faithful spouse, or trusted friend whose heart is breaking at the anger and accusation being directed at them by someone they've loved and to whom they've been faithful. How can they not feel accused, guilty, and responsible for the bitter crucifixion they're experiencing? Their pain will not feel "clean".

In effect, what they're feeling is more what Jesus felt as he was being crucified rather than what his mother felt as she witnessed it. They're experiencing what St. Paul refers to in his Second Letter to the Corinthians when he writes that, though innocent himself, *Jesus became sin*.

That single expression, unless properly read, can be one of the most horrifying lines in scripture. Yet, understood within the dynamics of love, it powerfully highlights what love really means beyond fairy tales. Real love is the capacity to absorb injustice with understanding, empathy, and with only the other's good in mind.

Of course, sometimes the anger directed at us from persons we love is justified and speaks of our betrayal, our sin, and our breaking of trust. Sometimes the angry accusations directed at us validly accuse us of our own sin. In that case, what we're asked to absorb has a very different meaning. As well, we need to recognize that we also do this to others.

When we're hurt and unable to direct our anger and accusations against those who hurt us, then, as Nadia Bolz-Weber so honestly shares, we often end up harming the people who love us most.

Love has many modalities, some warm, kind, and affectionate, some accusatory, bitter, and angry. Yes, sometimes we have strange, anomalous ways of expressing our love and trust. Who can understand our tortuous hearts!