

Art, a Name, and the Nature of Redeeming Love

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Earlier, I spent a good deal of time describing a piece of art which adorns one of the walls in my dining room. As you may recall a total of four pieces are actually together there and make up what I previously called “The Love Suite”. That title or name is one I have attached to the works, but the suite was originally given a different name by the artist. The original name will be revealed in the pages ahead, but I will withhold it for the time being. At this time, we shall look at the second piece of art in the suite.

The second piece of art in the suite, like all the other four, captures the plight of a monkish figure amidst a great struggle. In this work the figure is pictured upon a very jagged steep, on the side of a mountain, facing downhill, and walking backwards uphill while attempting to pull an enormous heart up the slope. The heart is attached to a very thin taught string. As in all the other pieces in the suite, the colors (red, gold, brown) are very deep and intense, foreboding even, and in the background a large sun bursts through casting its light upon the scene. As you look at the work you cannot help but pull for this struggling pilgrim who is clearly determined to keep this heart intact even amidst overwhelming odds and huge challenges. In viewing the painting you get the sense that this is a person who wants more than anything to preserve what is good and loving, and has made it a goal to make it to the top of the dangerous mountain with the heart in one piece.

But this is not an easily attainable goal in this life is it? In a world in which so many people are struggling emotionally, mentally, financially, morally, relationally, and spiritually, how many of us actually keep our hearts intact? On a recent trip out west I encountered a man who had apparently given up hope amidst great pain. After dinner one evening, late, and with no cab to be found, a friend and I hopped on the downtown rail system to get back to the hotel. Moments after sitting down and settling in for the brief ride a homeless man stepped on the train and began to explain his plight and need for money. Typically, I offer to take such people to get something to eat and make an attempt to show them genuine concern and interest while not providing a means for them to further any substance abuse issues that might be contributing to their situation. It is not always easy to know when and where to move outside of the box and do something differently.

After speaking with this man for a few moments I asked how he wound up homeless. His answer revealed the nature and source of his pain, loss, and emptiness. He said, “My fiancé left me, and I just gave up”. Surely, there is much more to his story, but this brokenness of heart was the thing that was on the forefront of his mind. Perhaps, his relationship with this woman was so deep and abiding that he could not recover from the loss. More likely, it was a tangled web of distortion, misery, and dysfunction. Either way, the loss of love and the fracture of the heart left this man in a very sad state. After encouraging him to explore the various church related homeless shelters and care options,

Michael (this was his name I would learn later) simply said, “This is my stop, I have to go”. With that he was gone into the night, and I expected I would never see him again. God had other plans, as the next few days would reveal. We will come back to this in a bit.

I cannot help but think to myself as I think about Michael and so many others who have given up on life, love, and the pursuits God has in mind for them, what life would and could be like if they chose different paths at critical moments in life. I cannot help but think how different my life might look had I made choices more in keeping with God’s agenda for me along my journey. At those forks in the road, which we all encounter again and again, the decisions we make often define our lives. The loves we should have chosen, the ones we should have turned away from, the moral decisions we should have been more vigilant on, the job we should or should not have taken, the dream we could have and should have pursued, those nights in barrooms and at parties that never should have unfolded the way they did, the lunch invitation we should never have taken, the one we should have taken, and the offer of God’s best that we always pull back from; all of these and so many more are the stuff our lives are made of. What we do in those moments define who we are and what our lives become. Actually, who we are determines how we make such decisions, and who we are determines where we will be in the future.

As I left Michael that evening, or as he left us there on the train, the challenge was brought to me, “Why did you not help him? Why did you not give him any money?” I thought about that for three days and felt pretty secure in my attempt to genuinely engage him. After all, I did make an effort to demonstrate compassion through conversation, and I was actually trying to give him good information as to where to go for lodging and food. I was also trying to keep him from any further drug or alcohol abuse by withholding the means to acquire those substances. The questions, however, remained with me for three days as I traveled to other places over 100 miles away. As I said before, I did not expect to see Michael again, nor did I expect to be back in that town for any period of time in the immediate future. God had a different plan.

Three days later, after spending time vacationing in a plush resort area far away from the town in which I encountered Michael, I found myself making a last minute decision to venture back to that city, downtown, for a brief shopping expedition. The area of town I found myself in was one I would not have expected to run into this homeless character again. Surrounded by design shops and fashion boutiques, my mind was on what I could buy, and certainly was not on who I could help. Then it happened, again. Just as my friend and I were making our way out of one shop and were heading to another, we decided not to cross the street. Instead, on a whim, we decided we had seen enough, bought enough, and walked enough, so we determined to head back to the vehicle and move on to our next destination some forty miles away. One half block later, who did we find sitting alone on the side of the street? That’s right, Michael. Only this time, there was no train stop, no time constraints, and no obstacles to my engaging him more fully.

Being thick of head and dull of senses, I was not so deaf to God's voice that I would allow this fork in the road to lead me astray. Looking Michael in the eyes and sensing the pursuing love of God at work, I decided to stop and talk with him again, and I purposed to hear God's voice in the middle of this divine appointment. As I talked with Michael I realized that he was aware, also, that we had met a few days earlier. He did not realize how unlikely a second meeting would be and so I talked to him about just how "accidental" this second meeting was and assured him of God's pursuit of him, His love for him, and His clear demonstration toward Michael that He, God, was aware of where he was, what his life had become, and was longing to reach him right where he was. Then we prayed together. At that moment, God called me outside of my box of comfort, and had me take note of the empty food box sitting next to Michael. Michael had just eaten and was not immediately in need of food. It was time to open the wallet and allow God to take care of Michael's next decisions.

So, that day, three days removed from our first encounter, a busy trip agenda removed, shopping distractions removed, and my agenda removed, I offered Michael hope, a prayer, human interest, God's grace, and \$16.00 for a night in a shelter. I do not know, and perhaps never will, how Michael used those few dollars, but I do know that God's love reached him, and I know that he was given a small glimpse of God's care and intimate knowledge of him. I hope and pray I also learned afresh to be keenly aware of the moments in life where God is calling me to make courageous, love-filled decisions that further His work in me and in others. My hope for Michael is that this one small act, two actually, will compel him to open His heart again to the possibility of love and that he will recognize that all pure love begins with the divine love of God through Jesus Christ. My hope is that Michael may take up the fight once again, and begin to climb the steep of life with his heart renewed and his energy and capacity for love refueled.

The Importance of a Name

The second time I encountered Michael is when I learned his name. Upon learning his name, I paid closer attention to the man. A name speaks so much. In biblical times, and this is still true in many cultures today, a name has enormous significance. In the Old Testament, names of people and the names for God are of supreme importance. The names of God tell of His character, His character is what establishes the reality of His working in people, and His acts demonstrate the expanse of His love for us. So much reverence was given to the name of God in biblical culture, that the Jewish people would not say God's name aloud. Rather, because He was viewed with so much awe and holy fear, His name would be spelled out with the vowels removed. Yahweh, the eternally existent, one, true, holy God, whose name and character are so pure, is to be revered. This is the impulse for the commandment, "Do not take the Lord's name in vain". Today people throw the name God around like its slang or an expression of some sort. Such a loose use of His name is indicative of our lack of knowledge as to who He is and how we ought to relate to Him. The literal interpretation of the commandment refers not to a "curse word", but rather to the useless or meaningless or common use of God's name. To associate the name of God with a flippant remark is to reduce Him to the profane, the common. We do not refrain from

using his name carelessly or uselessly out of a fear of punishment; rather, because we are in awe of the greatness of His character, love, and care for us, we hunger to offer Him our worship and respect. We joyously make use of His name in ways that point others to who He is.

You may be asking what the point of this diversion on the importance of names amounts to. Just as Michael's name made me more aware of his humanity, and just as God's name calls me to recognize who He is, so my name, my character, your name, your character, ought to cause sober consideration as to where our life is headed, what it has amounted to and who we hope to be. People know us by name. When our name comes up in conversation people immediately have a body of information which is based upon their knowledge of us and our actions. All of us associate names with character, events, emotions, stages of life, and defining circumstances. Some names bring pain, others tears of joy, some bring thoughts of hope, other names impose fear, still others cause feelings of gratitude to well up within us.

This consideration of names has been rekindled in me recently through my reading and my appreciation for film. Recently, after watching the film *Evening*, I spent hours reflecting on the importance of names, events, opportunities, and life-altering choices. The film, while not fully recognizing the reality of "mistakes" we make, is profound in its depiction of those decisions we make which shape our lives. Too often we fail to give enough consideration to events and choices as they are taking place. For many, if not most, only in the twilight of life is proper consideration given to the choices life has afforded. In the movie, the main character, a woman reflecting on her life choices, particularly her life loves, evaluates the relationships she pursued and the one she regrets not pursuing. As she lies on her death bed, surrounded by her daughters, care givers, and a friend, she is impacted deeply by the recollection of one love she let go. As she says in the movie, "That was the sail I should have taken". Despite all of her rationalization and desire to embrace all experiences as mere "happenings", deep down she cannot get away from the one love that was offered to her but which she did not pursue. She is left wondering just what life would have been had she taken that sailing trip when it was offered.

All of us have many trips or journeys offered to us. Some we should take others we should not. The man on a business trip, away from home and accountability, surrounded by "friends" encouraging him to "just have a little fun" is offered the journey of desire. The code of the road, his friends tell him, will protect him from exposure or consequence. Yet, after taking that little journey, he returns home to a wife and family less than he was before he left. Drowning in the reality that he is not who he presents himself to be, he, decision by decision, lie by lie, dies a bit more each day. In his twilight, after a life of such decisions, his name, his reflection in the mirror speaks of a man who should have been something other, and should have done differently. His kids do not respect him, his wife has gaping holes in her heart, and those who joined him in his "adventures" know just how duplicitous he really was.

Likewise, the adventure trips are offered to the woman. That woman who time and time again chooses way of easy affection eventually comes to know the nature of cheap love and empty thrills. It's tempting for her. The man, he may be married, he may not be, is good-looking, charming, fun, educated, important, wealthy, and interested. How does one choose the good way when everyone around her and too much within her says, "Just don't think about it? Feel it. There are no rules. No mistakes. Have a little fun." Or they may say, "They are all the same. Take what is offered to you." Or she may say to herself, "What's love got to do with it? Get yours while you can."

Like the man who chooses the way of the many, she will, in her *evening* be forced to consider what it all amounted to. The woman who chooses career over kids, lust over love, fun over fulfillment, sex over sanctity, and men over meaning will find the well empty as she lies in front of her family and friends on her death bed. Squandered opportunities for a life worth living, a love worth having, and peace worth pursuing will be gone. The electric sense of impulses embraced in those secret affairs will show up as electrifying if not horrifying realities when eternity is thrust upon her. "What if my course had been different" she will say to herself. What if I had embraced biblical faith early on? What if I had said no to that one? What if I had said yes to him? What if I had lived differently? What if my *name* had been different? What if? What if?

In the movie, *Evening*, Harris is the love she wished she would have embraced. He was the sail she wished she would have taken. He is the regret. She knew it all her life from the moment she met him. She just didn't make the decision. Sadly, upon her death bed, with friend beside her, she settles for the empty idea, "We did what we had to do". Who of us wants such a tag line on our tombstone?

Redeeming Love

Who is your Harris? What is it that you should be doing? Which One Thing are you really called to? Who is it that you know deep down you should be? These are the questions of our lives which open to door to true fulfillment, peace, adventure, and yes fun. There is nothing more fun than the pursuit of that which we were designed for. The people I have met along the way that are having the truest and lasting "fun" are those in tune with what God has called them to.

In Francine Rivers' book, *Redeeming Love*, she reframes the story of Hosea. The scene is out West during the Gold Rush days. In the hustle and bustle of the Wild West days and amidst the fever of the Gold Rush, other fevers developed in the cities. The pursuit of money, pleasure, sex, and fun was (and always is) the theme of the day. It is in this setting where the story of Angel and Michael Hosea unfolds.

Angel is a prostitute. More than that, she is a woman who has given up on love and turned herself against men. She is the woman who has let go of the string tied to her heart while climbing the steep of life. Amidst rejection from her parents and the physical and sexual abuse of men throughout her life, even in her childhood, she determines it's better to let go of the string and casts her heart into the abyss. Life for her becomes a day

by day, experience by experience, moment by moment fight for survival. True love does not exist, sex is just an act, and all of life is a financial exchange. Do whatever it takes to pay the bills, and then do it all over again tomorrow. No rules, just survival.

Michael Hosea, a farmer, is a man who has lived his entire life longing to pursue God's agenda for him. In business, relationships, and all of life he sets his heart to embrace Godly standards. He does this, not out of duty or fear, but out of a heartfelt knowledge of a loving God who has good in mind for His followers. Michael has found that all of life finds its bearings upon this foundation—a relationship with Christ. Amidst this conviction Michael has determined that eventually he will fall in love with a woman who is likewise grounded, and who is equal in her passionate pursuit of the loving agenda of God. He knows how to love such a woman, wants to love such a woman, and is sure God is going to bring him such a woman. ...until he sees Angel.

On a business trip, in the fray of the city, activity everywhere, and standing in the street while going about his business, Michael sees her. She is beautiful, astoundingly so, the most beautiful woman in town and Michael is smitten. But he is somehow drawn to more than her beauty. He sees something inside, he is not sure what, that is calling to him unlike anything has ever called to him before. He does not know her yet, and yet, he knows her completely. In a moment, the rest of his life flashes in front of him. This is the woman; he knows that he wants to spend the rest of his life with this one. He does not know, however, what this really means.

As Michael makes that life altering choice to pursue the one his heart is set on, he is struck by the awful reality that Angel is no angel. She could not, in fact, be further from his ideal woman. As he questions everything he has ever known and thought, including the purposes of God, he is forced to make a decision which will define who he is forever. This decision is one he will deal with in his twilight, in his evening of the soul.

Convinced against all he has ever desired, he is compelled to pursue a prostitute. In pursuing her, his heart is broken into a million pieces again and again. No matter how loving, patient, kind, pure and alluring his love for her is, she is utterly incapable and unwilling to return the same. His friends tell him of her character, and they tell him to run for his life, offering him details that should revolt him and cause him to abandon ship. His beliefs and convictions assure him that relationships worth pursuing must have certain compatibilities in place. And his pure heart, which is being shredded day by day, is left holding on by a string.

As the story unfolds in Redeeming Love the nature of God's love for us is revealed. It is a love against all odds. It is a love beyond human capacity. It is a love that endures. The road, perhaps, would have been much easier for Michael had he chosen another way, but it would not have been nearly as enriching, life-giving, and fulfilling. Nor would he have known the depths of God's love. And critically, Angel would have

not taken the journey that led her to embrace a new vision for her life. She would never have taken on a new name, a new life, a new nature.

The book, some 450 pages in length, is at once heart-breaking and life-giving. I read it in two days over three sittings. In all of Angel's escapes, retreats, and rebellions from the love of God represented in Michael Hosea's love for her, we see the attempts of so many around us to find life outside of the plan of God. All of us, apart from God, whore out our souls. The message of the Old Testament Prophets was largely focused on the infidelity of God's people. All of us, in abandoning the plan of God for our lives, are in effect soiling our souls with loves that ought not to be pursued. Like the whore who dirties herself act by act, day by day, so we too mar our hearts and diminish our souls each time we pass on the Harris opportunities God extends to us.

Friends, every day of your life choices are afforded you. Some choices are screaming out for your attention. That office romance that feels so good at this moment must be considered in light of eternity. It must be evaluated in light of who you are hoping to become as a person and what God calls each of us to be. The reality is simple to understand but difficult to embrace amidst temptations. Life will NOT just turn out the way it ought for you. The attainment of the life you crave, the life we all crave, can only be found as you make choices which will bring you to your destination safely. Not all choices lead to the same place. Choices do have consequences. The loves we pursue and the lives we lead are central to our name.

What Angel came to realize through the redeeming love of Michael Hosea, is that love can be found, and the heart can remain intact even amidst the ugliness of life and despite our repeated mistakes and failures. If we will but turn from our spiritual adultery and turn toward the life of Christ, we will find the strength to live in such a way that our twilight will be one we enjoy as we evaluate what we have done, where we have been, and who we have become. Angel, a prostitute who had let go of the string, and allowed her heart to plummet into the darkness, was eventually remade, renamed by the love of God into a person who came to find her place, purpose, life's work, and her man. In embracing Jesus, THE MAN, she was given everything. She was a woman who, though she all her material needs provided for, was starving emotionally, spiritually. Relationally, though experiencing the affections of men, the compliments of strangers, and the adoration of every eye in town, she was lost. In finding one love, different from all the others, life took on purpose for the first time.

The love of God heals the broken heart. It offers the correct path. It redefines fun. It provides the foundation for love that lasts. It is everything. It is life-altering, life-sustaining, and life-giving. The love of God is the Harris opportunity of all opportunities, friends. It is the one relationship offered to us which defines all others. If we pass on this one, all is lost. In embracing God through Jesus Christ, all of life opens up to us, a new canvass is presented, and the work of God begins afresh.

As the scriptures suggest, "What shall it profit you if you gain the world and yet lose you soul?" Malcolm Muggeridge, in his work, *Jesus the Man Who Lives*, reminds

us of the need for a twilight perspective when he writes, “The only way to be sane about history is to keep its end in view, as the only way to be sane about living is to keep death in view”.

And so I ask you, what will you think of your current pursuits down the road? What will your children say of you when you are gone if you continue living the way you are currently living? What love will you wish you had pursued when lying on your death bed? What thing will you wish you had tried? What cause will you wish you had given your all to? History tells us that the evening of our lives never amounts to the toys, the money, the sex, the affairs, the conquests, the trophies, or the stuff. In the end, it always comes down to the relationships and the character. Always. Those two things are fundamentally determined by The relationship offered to us in Christ. It is everything. In taking that relationship on, everything that is His and all that He is becomes yours! And what is He exactly? What exactly is He offering? Love. Love with a definitive reality (see the previous chapter on the nature of Love). Such a love frames all we know.

Love is such a power that it makes all things to be shared. Therefore love Jesus, and all things that he has are yours. He by his Godhead is maker and giver of time. He by his Manhood is the true heeder of time. And he by his Godhead and Manhood together, is the truest judge and the asker of account of the spending of time. Knit thee therefore to him, by love and by belief.

The Cloud of Unknowing

The Art of Love

In the beginning of this chapter I referred to the artwork on my dining room walls and indicated that I had named it the “Love Suite”. I also indicated that this was not the original name given by the artist, the creator of the work. The truth is that the renaming of this suite was for me very important. The reason is that over time God has brought me to a place where the goal of my life, as I worship, honor, and love God, is to work toward helping others recognize that the chief end of us all is to know Him, love Him, and enjoy Him forever. When the heart is changed by God, and it must be a supernatural change initiated by Him, we are made new. All of life becomes new. We are given a new name. And so, this suite of artwork, originally named “Lost Angel” was renamed as it was placed upon my walls as a prayer for me, my family, those I know and love, and those I am yet to know and love, that we all might be made new and become what God is longing for us to be. Just as Angel was lost until she found the love of God, and was renamed upon embracing that love, so too I long for you to be captivated by His love and see all of life redefined and renewed before your very eyes. It is at this juncture where art and life and love meet that God does His greatest creative work. He desires to do it in you. I pray that you choose this love today in order that the rest of your life leads toward an *evening* you never forget...and one you never want to forget.

Wishing you Everything in Him,
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