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God's Tough Love

Monday, February 21, 2011 | Written by Laura Z. Sowers

To say it had been a few rough years is an understatement. Just months after caring for my parents through their final illnesses, I became sick. Leukemia. Then, industrial strength chemo, a dreaded relapse, and the difficult choice to go to California for a "last-option" bone marrow transplant.

To be honest...I didn't understand why God had allowed this sickness. I had been walking closely with Him during the years of caring for my folks and felt new strength and deeper intimacy with Him. This harsh new development baffled me. It felt like discipline, but I wasn't sure for what. It felt like stony silence from my best friend. It felt like severe judgment. And, inexplicably, in the midst of all the confusion, it felt like love.

This was not the cozy, affirming, and validating love we tend to think of. It was tough. It was as though the challenges of the past had been boot camp. Now God was putting me in a battle that would either reveal a grown-up faith, or puny, sentimental rhetoric.

During this time I met a young man at the Starbucks where I often had my quiet time. He was engaged to be married, a cynical intellectual, and a self-described atheist. Through the course of my illness, we had many long talks about Christianity, faith, and trials.

After almost four months in California, I returned home with my brand new bone marrow. One day my friend and I sat down to have coffee and catch up. As the conversation drew to a close, he sat back in his chair and leveled his gaze on me. I thought for sure my wig had gone wonky, but he asked, "You say God loves you, right?" I kind of knew what was coming next.

"Right," I answered.

"So, why did He let this happen to you?"

I wish I could report that I answered brilliantly and gave him a concise theological course on God's purposes. I did my best, but to tell you the truth, it isn't easy to explain why an all-loving God allows times of suffering, silence, and humbling periods of correction. And through it all, He is growing, refining, humbling, and loving us like crazy.

Love. Now, here's a word that's been kicked around like a hackey sack. When it comes to love, we use the same word to describe our preference for chocolate, to describe our relationship to our husband and children, and to God. In context, we understand the differences, but there is a necessary limitation that comes with being confined to a single word.

The problem is compounded when we move out of the comfortable realms of romantic love (eros), friendly love (philia), and even unconditional love (agape), used to describe God's love for us. There seems to be a shortage of words to describe love that goes silent when we're desperate for answers, or tightens the conviction that's pinching our hearts, or looks past our spruced-up best presentation of ourselves and sees the gunk lurking underneath.

laser love

To most people, outward appearance is pretty important. It's no surprise that the new airport full-body scanners have created a public uproar. The scanners produce an image of the nude body as a means of finding weapons that might be used in a terrorist attack. Naturally, many people have regarded this intimate view of the body as a violation of personal rights and dignity. After all, we generally choose clothing that allows us to maintain modesty and disguise physical imperfections. But the scanners look right through it and reveal it all: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

God's tough love penetrates our best efforts to impress and cover up. In Scripture, we find a rich, young man who ran to Jesus in an eager attempt to gain eternal life. Instead he found himself under the laser scrutiny of the Lord.

"Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him and asked Him, 'Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?'" (Mark 10:17).

Although this appealing young man was seeking a good thing, Jesus looked at him with a full-heart scanner and detected a critical problem. The man proclaimed to keep all the commandments including the command to love his neighbor as he loved himself.

"Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross and follow Me.'" (Mark 10:21).

Jesus saw this individual with absolute clarity and He "loved him." But the young man responded with sadness and went away. Jesus had dispensed tough love that revealed a prideful heart and a love of wealth above all else.

"come here" love

I clearly remember as a child hearing these dreaded words from my mom: "Laura Zane, come here this instant!" Whether I had cut my own hair or mindlessly chipped the stucco off my grandparents' garage, I knew I'd been busted. I might try to talk my way out of it, but it didn't take a CSI team to sniff out the evidence to convict me.

So I can somewhat sympathize with the Samaritan woman at the well when Jesus said to her, "Go call your husband, and *come here*" (John 4:16 emphasis, mine). In her bold flippancy, she answered with a half-truth, "I have no husband." But Jesus loved her too much to let her wiggle out from under His scrutiny.

"You have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband..." (John 4:1).

She must have squirmed as He laid out her past behaviors and the truth of her current situation. What could be more convicting than a holy God pointing out your specific sin? Yet unlike the young man who sadly walked away, this wayward woman set down her waterpot and went to the city to proclaim, "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" (John 4:29).

Jesus hadn't detoured to Samaria simply to engage in a verbal joust with a rebellious woman. He made a purposeful journey to pay a tough-love visit to a much-loved daughter.

silent love

The Samaritan woman did not know Jesus when he confronted her, but consider Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. As good friends of Jesus, the two sisters sent word to Him immediately when Lazarus became ill. They appealed to Him on the intimate basis of relationship and love: "Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick" (John 11:3). I'm sure they expected Him to drop everything and immediately come heal His friend.

"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when He heard that he was sick He stayed two more days in the place where He was" (John 11:5-6).

He loved them, yet 'He stayed two more days'? How could they not be completely confused by this apparent disregard for their critical need? Day one: Silence. Day two: Silence. Day three: Silence. Day four....

By the time Jesus finally arrived, Lazarus had been dead four days. *Too late now even for Jesus*, they thought. As Martha so delicately described it in the old King James Version: "But Lord, he stinketh."

There are times God answers our prayers with silence, not because He doesn't love us, but because He trusts us to receive His apparent silence with pure confidence in Him. In the case of Lazarus, the Lord had more in mind than simply healing him. Others had been raised, healed, and restored.

Jesus loved these friends so much that He trusted them with the tough love of an initial silence. This act led to the unprecedented revelation that Jesus Christ is more than a healer and a miracle worker: He is the Resurrection and the Life.

costly love

I've gotten to the point in my life where I can pretty much discern the cheap sentiment "you-complete-me" kind of rhetoric from genuine and costly love.

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1).

I marvel at this statement. That God would leave heaven to make Himself known to us amazes me. Hard as I try, I can't fathom how tough it was for Him to consent to be humbly born, disrespected, slandered, betrayed and slaughtered, so that you and I could be His children. This, in spite of our selfish demands, prideful proclamations, outright lies, blatant sins, lame excuses, and bored indifference. He loves us a lot.

"By this we know love because He laid down His life for us" (1 John 3:16).

I've heard it said that a thing is worth just what it costs. God's love for us cost Him everything. No sugar-coated sentiment here. He died for us. That's tough love.