

PLAIN TRUTH®

Volume 87, Number 3

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Closer Than You Know

By Greg Albrecht

"God could not be everywhere and therefore he made mothers."

—Rudyard Kipling

The mother and her children were on a ship filled with starving people. The captain of the ship saw this mother and her two children, and moved by compassion he gave her one of the few pieces of bread left on that ship. Without a second thought, the mother tore the piece of bread in two, and gave the two pieces to her children while taking none for herself.

As Victor Hugo tells this story, he has a deckhand standing near the captain as they both witness this mother's extraordinary self-sacrificial love.

Amazed by the fact that the woman hadn't even taken one bite of the piece of bread for herself, the sailor asked the captain "Is it because she is not hungry, Captain?"

The captain replied, "No, it is because she is a mother."

Perhaps God made mothers to give us the experience of a kind of love in which a child, the recipient of a mother's love, will not or cannot reciprocate love in the same way and degree the mother can.

We cannot ever pay back our mother sufficiently, and that lesson in a physical relationship is exactly what we must realize when it comes to the love God has for us. Thanksgiving and gratitude, yes—payback no, impossible. Can't be done.

The Mother Who Births our Soul

Julian of Norwich (1343-approx. 1416), whose name causes some to assume she was a man, is credited with being the first woman to write a book in the English language.

Julian was way ahead of her time in her insistence that divine love is like motherly love—she spoke of God as both our mother and our father. Writing some 600 years ago, she said that the bond between a mother and a child is the only earthly relationship that truly illustrates the relationship a person can have with Jesus.

She completely disagreed with the popular conception of a God whose wrath causes pain

in our lives, a father who delights in teaching us lessons through our suffering...and of course, sadly, that same misunderstanding of God holds sway in our world today.

Julian of Norwich once said, in terms of the mistaken idea of God's wrath, *"I saw no wrath except on man's side, and He [God] forgives that in us, for wrath is nothing but a perversity and an opposition to peace and love."*

Here's a brief excerpt from her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, which serves as an example of her perception of Jesus and how he, as God in the flesh, embodied divine, mother's love:

Our true mother, Jesus, he who is all love...sustains us within himself in love and was in labour for the full time until he suffered the sharpest pangs and the

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Reflecting on Grace

On a recent visit to see my parents, my mother caught me completely by surprise one morning after breakfast. With a smile on her face, she handed me a small treasure buried deep in the palm of her hand. She handed me a white gold ring. “Here,” she said, “this was your great grandmother Grace’s engagement ring. I want you to have it.”

“Whoa, wow!!...really?!...my great grandmother’s engagement ring?” The thought of such a personal and precious item from my *great* grandmother so many years ago took me back. “I’m honored and flattered, Mom, thank you so much!” Beyond that, I was speechless. I didn’t know what else to say.

For several years now my mother has been in a mode of giving things away. Whether family furnishings, pieces of art painted by family members or collected over the years, heirlooms, knick-knacks or dining room china, flatware or glassware, Mom has asked each of her children to first agree and then to claim whatever we’d like. As I live in Southern California and Mom and Dad live in North Carolina, it makes little sense to me to ship such treasures all the way across the country. Beyond that, I have everything I need at home already and so I’ve not been one to take on more. Call me a true Scot, but I’ve never taken Mom up on her kind offer.

However, this small piece of family history was different. This gift seemed more personal. To me, the appeal of the ring was not in its appraised value or the size of the diamond set beautifully within the

surrounding white gold. For me, the ring’s appeal was in its history, and my great grandmother Grace’s place within that history.

My great grandmother, Grace, was born on August 30, 1879. She lived most of her life in or around the New York City area. Grace stood all of 5-feet, 3-inches tall and, to my mother’s recollection, was “a tiny thing.” On June 12, 1906, Grace married my great grandfather

Like a diamond set firmly within white gold, sparkling for all to see, we are set firmly in Christ Jesus and reflect his light within us to the world. We sparkle and shine his light outward, back to him and to one another...We have a place in Jesus and he in us.

Walter, a man who stood at least 6-feet, 3-inches tall.

Apparently, the two of them made “quite the sight walking around the city together,” my mom laughed. The two had one child, my grandmother, Marion.

I love history. In fact, I’m a bit of a nut for it. And yet, I knew so little of my own family history, just a few short generations back. There are certainly any number of websites and services that offer the opportunity to dig around a little into one’s family history. I guess I just hadn’t made it that far, to that point. When my mother handed me the ring, and then shared some of the family details I now share with you, I felt as if I’d entered a piece of our history. I felt like I’d

found my place in our family’s story in a way I hadn’t before. I must admit, finding that place sure felt good.

Our Place in a Family Story

As Christ-followers, we have a history, a story, set within a family. We are a precious part of that story, that history; precious like an engagement ring, and yet far more. Like a diamond set firmly within white gold, sparkling for all to see, we are set firmly in Christ Jesus and reflect his light within us to the world. We sparkle and shine his light outward, back to him and to one another.

Jesus Christ is our history, our story and our family. We have a place in Jesus and he in us. Just as my mother had given me a family treasure that was so personal, we have been given life in him and as such, we are personal to him. We are his precious treasure and he is our precious life.

As members of his body, we are part of and have a place as the bride of Christ. We are part of *the story, the history and the family* that will live on for all generations. As we come to see our story, our history, and our place in family with him, we come to deeply value and appreciate what we’ve been given.

Whether or not we have the words to express ourselves completely at the precious and personal gift of Christ in us, we give thanks. In his life, we have life and that beautiful sparkle comes to mean more and more to us over time. □

—Ed Dunn

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most grievous sufferings that ever were or shall be, and at the last he died. And when it was finished...he had born us...

The mother can give her child her milk to suck, but our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and he does so most generously and most tenderly...

This fair, lovely word "mother," it is so sweet and so tender it is most truly said of him... the birth of our body is only low, humble and modest compared to the birth of our soul...and it is Jesus who does it...

All the debt we owe, at God's bidding, for his fatherhood and motherhood, is fulfilled by loving God truly; a blessed love which Christ arouses in us."

This Christ-centered lady wrote of the life and ministry of Jesus in the light of what we know as a mother's love. In a similar way as God, through Isaiah, explained his transcendent love for us, far beyond the greatness of a mortal mother's love.

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the

child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! —Isaiah 49:15

Our earthly mothers birth us—they bring us into this world—and through their labor and the sacrifice of their bodies, they give birth to our lives that will one day end in death. But "Mother" Jesus births us to eternal life that never ends.

When it comes to understanding the love of God, there is really no better metaphor or comparison than to say that God loves us like a mother loves her children.

Our physical, earthly mothers are not and were not perfect, of course—and in a few cases they seemed not to care. But in the vast majority of cases, mothers care, they love and they are filled with self-sacrifice for their children.

The story is told of Thomas Edison who was sent home from school as a young boy with a note from his teacher. The note to Thomas Edison's mother said, "Your son is dumb. We can't do anything for him." Mrs. Edison wrote back, "You do not

understand my boy. I will teach him myself."

Mrs. Edison did teach the young Thomas Edison herself—and the rest is, as they say, history.

Seven Buses

In 2010 Gregory Boyle wrote his memoir, *Tattoos on the Heart*, based on his ministry as a priest in Pico Aliso—a depressed area of grinding poverty in Los Angeles, inhabited by a predominantly Latino population. Pico Aliso is dominated by gangs, identified by their tattoos.

The title of his book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, has a powerful subtitle that informs the reader about the direction of his book. The subtitle reads "*The Power of Boundless Compassion.*" Gregory Boyle is using the omnipresent tattoos of gangs to illustrate the deeper and far more meaningful spiritual tattoo on our hearts.

Here's a brief excerpt from the first chapter of *Tattoos on the Heart* as Gregory Boyle talked about his ministry to and relationship with one particular young teenage boy


named Rigo. Rigo had been arrested and placed in a county detention center in Glendora, a suburb some 28 miles northeast of Rigo's home in Pico Aliso.

Father Boyle had gone to visit Rigo and was talking with him in the gym before Mass about his family:

Rigo...remembered one day when he got into trouble at school—he was in fourth grade and he got sent home early from school and he dreaded going home to report what had happened.

"When I got home, my jefito [a Spanish idiom for Dad or boss] was there. He was hardly ever there. My dad says, 'Why they send you home?'





**God's love is greater.
Greater than any love
we will ever know,
including that of our
mother for us.**

And cuz my dad always beat me, I said, 'If I tell you, promise you won't hit me?' He just said, 'I'm your father. Course I'm not going to hit you.' So I told him.

Rigo can't continue talking right away—he breaks down in tears. He starts to wail, rocking back and forth, so I put my arm around him. When he is finally able to speak, and barely so, he says, 'He beat me with a pipe... with a pipe!'

When Rigo composes himself I ask him about his mother. He pointed to the other side of the gym, where a tiny woman has just walked in. 'That's her over there.' He pauses for a beat. 'There's no one else like her. I've been locked up for more than a year and a half. She comes to see me every Sunday. You know how many buses she take every Sunday—to see my sorry ass?'

Then he breaks down in tears again—and once again it takes him a while to regain his composure—finally, gasping between his tears he says, 'Seven buses...she takes...seven... buses. Imagine.'"

To understand why Rigo's mother had to take seven buses to travel 28 miles from her home in Pico Aliso to a teenage detention center in Glendora to visit her son it helps to understand how inadequate and inefficient the public bus service in greater Los Angeles is.

You can get most places on a bus operated by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, but because the routes are so convoluted and confusing, if you are going very far you will need to get off a bus, transfer to another bus, and so on—sometimes a number of times. It can take several hours to arrive at your destination. **Rigo's mother took seven buses, once a week, to visit her son.**

Closer to You Than the Dirt Under Your Fingernails

Father Greg Boyle explains the obvious lesson. No matter how far away we are. No matter what we have done. No matter how long it

will take him, God will always come after us, visit us and be with us. He will take seven buses and more. He will "travel" as far and as long as it takes.

After telling this story of Rigo and his mother in his book, *Tattoos on the Heart—The Power of Boundless Compassion*, Father Greg Boyle concludes:

In Spanish, when you speak of your great friend, you describe the union and kinship as being 'de una y mugre'—our friendship is like the fingernail and the dirt under it...The desire of God's heart is immeasurably larger than our imaginations can conjure.

My friends, dear readers, God's love is greater. Greater than

any love we will ever know, including the greatest love, that of our mother for us. He will take seven or more buses, whatever it takes, to be with us.

Celebrating and giving thanks for our earthly parents on Mother's Day and on Father's Day gives us a rare opportunity to take a glimpse into the vast gap between heaven and earth—and how that God goes to any lengths to travel between eternity and mortality.

In Christ, God came (and still does!) from outside time and space so that he might be "inside" our time and space, like Rigo's mother took those seven buses to visit him "inside" where he was doing time as a captive of his time and space.

As we give thanks for all that mothers are—as we remember the self-sacrifice and service our own mother gave us, may we come to a deeper insight into the divine love of God for each of us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. □



Scared Prayers

Steve Brown

I heard a story about a farmer who was working with his son out in the field as a tornado moved toward their farm. He could hear his son begin frantically praying behind him and the farmer said, “Run son—a scared prayer ain’t worth spit!”

That farmer didn’t know what he was talking about. I do my best praying when I’m scared! That’s when I’ve repented of all my sins, made promises that I’ll do better and forgiven everybody who drove me nuts. Scared prayers are also when I hear from God.

First, when I’m in panic mode, God tells me to get over myself.

Years ago, I wrote in one of my Bibles, “You wouldn’t be so shocked at your own sin if you didn’t have such a high opinion of yourself.” It’s kind of like that but with a twist—“You wouldn’t be so scared if you didn’t have such a high opinion of your importance.”

That’s what Paul referred to when he wondered why he had to deal with his “thorn in the flesh.” God showed Paul that it was for his sake that he not become conceited. And that God’s “grace is sufficient for you, for my [God’s] power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). When John

the Baptist said that Jesus must increase and John must decrease (John 3:30), that wasn’t an action. It was a simple recognition that John was little and Jesus was big.

One of the dangers of social media is that everybody gets a microphone and an audience. The mantra is “Keep talking until something comes to mind.” It doesn’t matter if it’s hateful, shallow or divisive...as long as you just keep talking. That can happen to all of us and especially preachers.

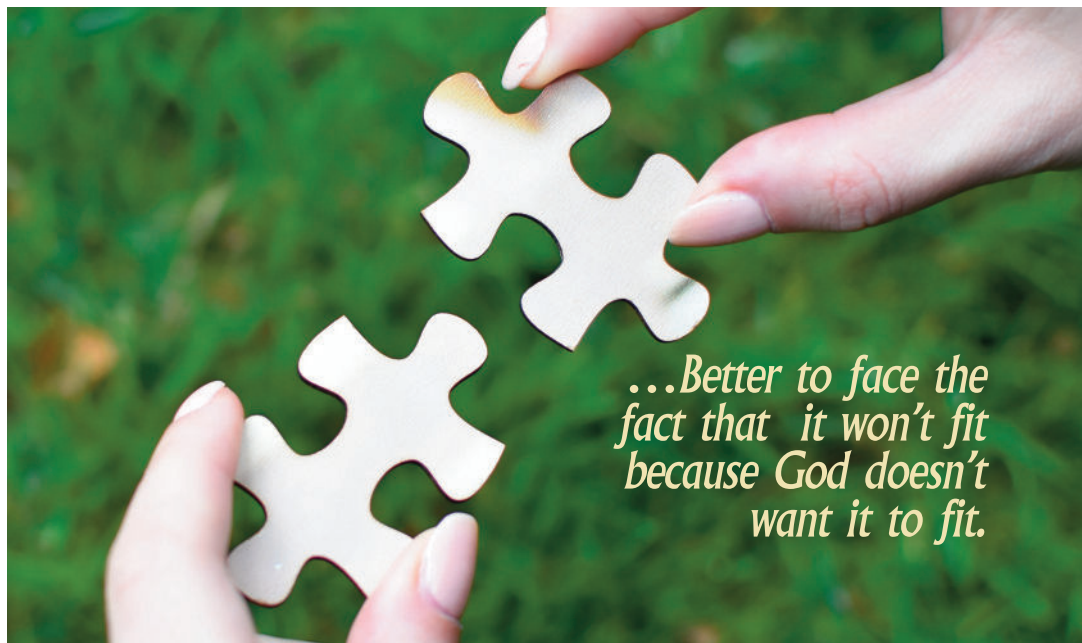
It’s so easy to start thinking that “everything is about me.” That leads to the thought that everything depends on me and every success or failure in my life is

a big deal because...well, because I’m so important.

We are all valuable, but it’s a long journey from there to thinking that the world rests on our shoulders.

That’s why it’s a very good practice to meditate on God’s holiness. It reminds us that he is big and we are little. He is infinite and we are finite. He is eternal and we tarry here just a little while. He is in control and we are not.

That’s not a bad thing. It’s what the Psalmist meant when he wrote, “My eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted



...Better to face the fact that it won't fit because God doesn't want it to fit.

my soul, like a weaned child with its mother..." (Psalm 131:1-2).

So, when I'm in panic mode, it's helpful to remember that what I say, do and think aren't nearly as important as I sometimes believe.

Second, when I'm in panic mode, it's also helpful to remember that not only is God big and I'm not, but he is in control even if it doesn't feel like it to me.

I like to be in control but God won't allow it because we can't both be in control. That might make my panic mode even worse, but if "I go with God's flow" no matter what it is that he—a sovereign God—has ordained, things will be okay. It won't necessarily be pleasant or to my liking, but it is what is best.

Just Make it Fit

Our daughter Jennifer and her husband Jim came up with a new family slogan. They were working on a puzzle and couldn't get some of the pieces to fit. One of their young daughters said, "Just make it fit."

So that has become the banner over their household. "Just make it fit!" That's funny, but it's not a good life goal. Better to face the fact that it won't fit because God doesn't want it to fit. Then go to a movie instead.

Third, when I'm in panic mode, it helps to remember that God really likes me.

Jesus said, "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

When the Bible talks about "remission of sin" it means that all evidence of sin has been removed. So, in God's presence there is no evidence of anything but goodness—Christ's goodness put into my account. Why shouldn't God like me? ☐

Steve Brown, is an author, professor and president of Key Life Network.

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Memories & Mercies

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

In my grandmother's house there were biscuits and hymns and stories." These memories of childhood are Yolanda's, not mine. My paternal grandmother was very fussy and ill-tempered and never bothered to learn our names. Grandfather was gruff and mostly silent. We visited them once a month, always pleased when pleasant weather allowed us to play outside.

My maternal grandparents' home was hardly any more inviting, often tension between the two of them. He had run off and lived a bigamous life with another family years earlier, and her unhappiness lingered into old age.

But she did express her love for me, if in no other way than making sure my naked dolls had proper clothes. In fact, I sometimes stripped the dolls before she visited, accepting her scolding as fair trade for another new outfit.

For Yolanda Pierce who grew up in a poor blighted neighborhood in Brooklyn, her grandmother's house was just that—a house with no grandfather, no father or mother. Her grandmother raised her and was more formative than anyone else in her life:

"I had a praying grandmother, and nothing I have accomplished would have been possible without her prayers"—her love, her discipline and encouragement.

Graduating with a B.A. from Princeton University, Yolanda holds two M.A. degrees and a PhD from Cornell. After teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary for nine years, she was appointed Dean of the School of Divinity at Howard University.

An ordained minister, her preaching is drawn largely from her grandmother's theology, "rooted in generational wisdom in the way that time and age and maturity provide an alternative lens...to know and understand God." Indeed, her grandmother's

theology goes back generations "to the kitchens, hair salons, gardens, and church basements of older Black women who are often invisible in theological discourse."

The Christian faith was "real and tangible." There was no picture of a white Jesus knocking at a door, as there was in the farmhouse of my childhood. Rather, "Jesus was a Black man," depicted in a wall-hanging by an amateur artist. Cooking was her grandmother's calling, "as she ministered to the lonely and the sick and the lost with a Bible in one hand and a freshly baked pound cake in the other." Growing up, Yolanda came to know Jesus in the same way:

I thought everybody knew Jesus as a good neighbor who visited often. We called on Jesus when the groceries ran low or when someone's fever ran high...when the rent check was due or when death visited...when bodies were healed...and relationships were restored.

My own maternal grandmother, nearing ninety, became ill while I was a freshman in high school. Only two blocks from the hospital, I could get there and back during noon hour, a routine I relished. I would race down three flights of stairs to the cafeteria, grab a sandwich and a vanilla dixie cup with a little wooden spoon, get to her bedside with twenty minutes for visiting while feeding her the ice cream and sharing family news. One day when I came, the nurse couldn't awaken her, telling me she had slept through breakfast. She never again woke up.

My grandparents were poor. Besides a few pieces of furniture, dishes and clothes she left very little behind. Several weeks after her funeral, however, my mother presented me with her sewing kit, a small green and white plastic woven box with needles, thread, thimbles and pins, maybe worth a dollar at a rummage sale. Not Yolanda's house-full of formative theology and pound cakes, but a little sewing box I still use today filled with memories and tender mercies. □

—Ruth Tucker



Quotes & Connections



"A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity. It dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path."—Agatha Christie

"If being a mother was going to be easy, it never would have started with something called labor!"—Anonymous

"A mother's happiness is like a beacon, lighting up the future but reflected also on the past in the guise of fond memories."
—Honore de Balzac

"In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom is a woman. 'The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,' she says (Proverbs 8:22). She was there when he made the heaven, the sea, the earth. It was as if he needed a woman's imagination to help him make them, a woman's eye to tell him if he'd made them right, a woman's spirit to measure their beauty by... Wisdom is a matter not only of the mind but of the intuition and heart, like a woman's wisdom. It is born out of suffering, as a woman bears a child. 'Her ways are ways of pleasantness,' says Solomon, then adding, just in case there should be any lingering question as to her gender, 'and all her paths are peace' (Proverbs 3:17)."
—Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*

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