

Good evening, everyone.

When I looked up the lectionary readings and read these words we just heard from 1 John 3, they struck me, challenged me, viscerally. I want to share with you my process of re-encountering this passage, in case it resonates for some of you, too. It came at just the right time for me — so much so that it now feels like a gift. But that isn't exactly what it felt like upon my first reading.

Let's look again at the first section of the reading, verses 16-18:

16 “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. **17** If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? **18** Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

Upon my first reading, what I saw were these things:

We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.. We ought to share with those in need.. We ought to love in actions and in truth.

I felt so convicted, immediately seeing and feeling the thousand ways I am falling short of what this passage calls me to.

While, thank God, most of us have not yet been in a situation of needing to decide whether or not to physically take a bullet for someone, or jump in front of a wild animal, or anything like that... The message of this passage, to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters// — who I interpret to mean any other child of God, or person made in the image of God, which is every person — // obviously extends beyond the giving of our physical lives in one, dramatic moment ... though for some it may come to that. There are many ways that we lay down our lives for each other. The passage even goes on to, basically, name one: if you have anything at all to share, share with those who are in need. *Love is action.*

This applies to all of us here. There are clearly *so* very many people in our world today in need, in *great* need. That is why the passage makes me feel convicted.

For many of us, we are absolutely inundated with awareness of need... Even my Instagram feed, along with the news, documentaries in the mediathek, books, friends... all inform me of large-scale suffering being experienced by different people around the globe: people who are starving, who are victims of all kinds of violence and oppression, who are being impacted by climate change and... the list goes on and on. This is not even to mention our own immediate surroundings: the person on the street asking for money, those in our lives whom we know are suffering from sickness, from financial struggles, from mental illness.

I am just going to come out and say it: sometimes it feels like TOO MUCH to bear.

I have used the term 'compassion fatigue' before here, in a prayer request. It is a phenomenon that has been studied in connection to the study of trauma. It can be linked with burnout and Wikipedia defines it as “a condition characterized by *emotional and physical exhaustion* leading to a *diminished ability to empathize or feel compassion* for others, often described as the *negative cost of caring*.”

While it is something that people in helping professions — such as therapists, doctors, others who work with people who are victims of trauma and disaster, etc. are particularly susceptible to...

I think that in our extremely globalized world, *particularly* after a year of a pandemic that has touched everyone's lives near and far, if you are an empathetic, caring, even somewhat tuned-in person... you might have felt 'compassion fatigue' at one point or another lately.

Even in pre-pandemic times, spiritual writer and priest, John O'Donahue, wrote, “There is a huge crisis of compassion in contemporary society. This crisis has nothing to do with our inability to feel sympathy for others. It has more to do with the *numbing* of our compassion through our image exposure to so many of the horrors that are happening around the world. We feel *overwhelmed* and then *hopeless*. It is important to remember that a proportion of our numbness is convenient. We avoid the harrowing images or allow ourselves to be immediately overwhelmed. Most of us continue our privileged lives within our complacent cocoons ... When we succumb to indifference, we blaspheme against the gifts that we could never earn that have been so generously given to us.”

Sadly, I see myself, at times, in this description by John O'Donohue. I want to change this, but at times, feel at a loss.

Maybe, at points lately you have felt like you are running on fumes: emotionally, financially, even physically in terms of energy... and you wonder how you can possibly find resources within yourself to even HEAR *one more sad thing*. Let alone, actually do something to help.

Or maybe, you've been trying to help where you can: donate to this charity, lend a listening ear to this friend, raise awareness for this issue... but it feels like it doesn't even scratch the surface of the need. It is never enough. You feel guilty for not doing more, to the point where you barely even feel like trying anymore.

I've had nights where the only thing I was willing to watch on TV was comedy. Sometimes I pass a person on the street or scroll past some cause on social media, basically going through a bunch of reasons (or excuses?) in my head, for why I can't help...

1 John 3:17 says, again, **“If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?”**

I *know* that this is speaking to me. I *want* the love of God to be in me... So why is my compassion numb sometimes?

Though I know that it's impossible to help every single person, or to fight for every cause, I *pray* to God that — in spite of being overwhelmed or tired myself, in spite of hardly even knowing where to begin, or knowing that I may not do it right, at least not the first time — that I will not become that person with 'no pity,' that I will not become hard of heart.

After the first reading, if I am being honest, and I am tired, the passage might lead me to ask: 'God, if I can barely find the resources within myself to *learn* about what that brother or sister is going through, how could I possibly bring myself to 'lay down my life' for him or her?'

If I were to stop after that first reading, I might walk away from this passage feeling sad, weary, full of self-loathing.

BUT ... and this is a big BUT

That is when it is time to go back and read it again. It is as if the passage anticipated where my thoughts might go.

Because not *only* does this passage give us instruction, or a *call*, it ALSO gives us *resources...*

In a first reading, I might forget to put those first verses together with the verses that come right after them. EXACTLY the feelings I was describing, from my first reading, are addressed.

Starting with verse 19, the passage goes on to say:

19 “This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: **20** If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God **22** and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. **23** And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. **24** The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

And back up to the top, verse 16 once more:

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us

So, before we are asked to lay down our own lives, we are reminded that Jesus laid down his life for us, out of love.

We are called to love and to bless, **but** out of a place of *belovedness* and *blessedness*. Our hearts may feel weak and even fail us, but **GOD is greater than our hearts**, and God dwells in us.

God has the resources we lack, and we can ask for them. We have been given the Spirit of God to live in us... which moves us to compassion, to generosity.

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Henri Nouwen was a priest and spiritual writer who spent the last ten years of his life living and working in a place called L'Arche, where people with and without intellectual disabilities live together in community. In his book, 'Life of the Beloved', Henri Nouwen writes:

"Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us **the 'Beloved.'** Being the Beloved expresses the **core truth** of our existence." ///

The more we come to understand our *belovedness* and the *more we claim our blessedness*, the more capacity we have to love others.

And how do we claim our blessedness?

Nouwen makes two suggestions: through prayer and through cultivating presence.

On prayer, he writes, “The movement of God’s Spirit is very gentle, very soft — and hidden. It does not seek attention. But that movement is also very persistent, strong and deep. It changes our hearts radically. **The faithful discipline of prayer reveals to you that you are the blessed one and gives you the power to bless others.**”

And on cultivating presence, he writes: “**The problem of modern living is that we are too busy — looking for affirmation in the wrong places? — to notice that we are being blessed.**”

The summary is “**It is remarkable how easy it is to bless others, to speak good things to and about them, to call forth their beauty and truth, *when you yourself are in touch with your own blessedness.***”

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When I am tired, when I am overwhelmed, it is so hard to be generous. I can hardly bring myself to give anything at all, much less my very life. I feel like hoarding. I can find myself operating out of a *mindset of scarcity*, thinking that is what I need to survive and thrive.

But this mentality is backwards. A scarcity-mentality is the mindset of the world: I have to protect what is mine, or I will lose. But a Kingdom-mindset is one of *abundance*. Where the world sees a mustard seed, God sees a mighty tree. Nouwen writes, “The

world and its strategies may help you to survive for a long time, but they cannot help you live because the world is not the source even of its own life, let alone yours.”

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Neither Nouwen, nor John are saying we can do *everything*, that we can be everything to every one, but we can try to keep our hearts open to loving the next person we encounter, we can try to do the next right thing, the next faithful thing, however small it may be. Not out of a place of self-condemnation, not even out of our own strength and might and ability,

but out of a love that flows from deep knowledge and that we are *beloved*.

Amen.