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DEBBIE BLUE



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Nooses and Knots

I'm not good with answers. I used to do okay with them on tests in school, but lately someone asks, "How do you get to 35E?" and I can't remember any street names or which way is east. The other day when I was getting my hair cut, a woman asked me where I lived and all I could do was point. I did manage, in the end, "By the river." She looked at me like I was two and said, "That's nice."

When someone from my church says they'd like to arrange a time to get together because they have some questions, I tend to get a little panicky. I love it when people want to get together to talk. I like having coffee with people and listening to them put their lives into words. I'm amazed at lives. They are heartbreaking and outrageous and beautiful and sad. It's when I get the feeling that people might need me to do more than listen—need me to offer guidance—that I feel the possibility of clarity vanish, the ambiguity of every

situation rushes in. This is admittedly not a good quality for a church leader.

The word *pastor* derives from shepherd, animal husbandry. *Herd* seems different from *lead*, less gallant. Last summer my kids and I went to the Minnesota Sheep and Wool Festival. It was in Mora, a small town about half an hour from our farm. We saw lots of shepherds there. Some wore dirty jeans and coughed and spit. Some had beer bellies. A young couple who looked more urban than rural was selling cheese. Sheep's cheese. They milked their flocks and then laced the product with fennel and rosemary. I wonder if shepherds ever really watched their flocks or if they sat in the shade playing cards or the lute or smoking and drinking. Did shepherds really lead the sheep, or was it more like they followed them around, yelling out occasionally to try to scare away coyotes? I don't know that much about shepherds. I don't know if *pastor* is a very good word for what preachers do. I'm certainly startled when someone addresses me as Pastor Blue. It seems funny to me. Not just funny weird, but it makes me want to laugh funny. Not at them, but just the whole idea.

It seems like the church has a reputation for being a place you go for answers, or to get your life straightened out. That's probably a lot because the church has encouraged this image of itself. Some churches promise this on billboards or cable TV: Are you messed up? Is your life in shambles? Jesus can make a difference in your life right now, this minute. A smiling man vows that his church is committed to helping every person, regardless of background and economic status, to achieve his or her fullest potential. He seems comfortable, as if he belongs in the TV studio with his nicely fitting suit and open collar and his haircut and the bright lights and his perfect teeth. Call 1-800-555-5555. I wonder who is on the

other end of the line and what they say. Maybe something wonderful and helpful. And there are testimonials. I grew up hearing constant testimonials from former drug addicts or atheist devil worshipers or gang members, stories of how people walked through the doorway of a church and from that moment on their lives got better, cleaner. I believe people can help people and churches can help people. Maybe these churches really do deliver what they advertise, but I can't help thinking it's a misrepresentation of what faith is like.

Often when I'm struggling to write a sermon, feeling more like a squirrel than a shepherd, I'll vaguely remember something Father Zossima said. So I scan the pages of *The Brothers Karamazov* looking for that sublime or searing something. It's usually around midnight, and I usually get a headache, and I usually don't find it, and I wish I could just sit down with him and ask him a few questions. I realize he's a character in a book, but I admire him. I like his style. Eduard Thurneysen describes Zossima's pastoral approach: "It is not designed to remove [people's] burdens, to lead them out of the uncertainties of their lives, but it is intended to lead [people] into them truly and for the first time, . . . for in persevering in the uncertainties of life, he sees the only way of redemption."¹

I honestly don't know what it would even quite mean to straighten a life out. I have hardly ever seen anything alive that seemed very straight or very neat. I'm not sure if you can keep anything that is alive entirely clean. Being alive is just very wild. Nerve endings and eating and anger and orgasms. I've heard that the color you paint your bedroom can affect how you feel when you wake up in the morning, and so can clouds. Every moment it seems like you truly can and truly can't predict what will happen every next moment. I don't even know what dark matter and dark energy

are, but apparently they are the dominant constituents of the universe. There's the warping and curving of time and space, extra space dimensions, quantum jitters. Uncertain is too mild a way of putting it—it's outrageous to be alive. Life isn't simple and coherent. It is inexplicable and lush and desperate and sad and beautiful and scary. I don't know how anyone could "figure it out." The factors are beyond figuring. It would be like stuffing sunflowers and giant sequoias and birth and death and ten thousand variables into an equation. And yet we all seem to be constantly trying.

People talk a lot about the necessity of stability: we must have stable homes, a stable environment for our children, stable personalities, stable marriages, stable jobs, as if stability were the highest good. But even though my family eats dinner together, though we have managed to establish a bedtime routine, though the kids generally brush their teeth at least two times a day, I don't feel like I encounter all that much that I could very accurately describe as quite "stable." What does stability really even look like?

I know what striving for the appearance of stability looks like, like me not wailing and pounding my chest (even though I feel like it) when my ten-year-old son says maybe this year he'd rather I didn't join him in the school cafeteria for Parent Lunch Day. Like my copastors walking into the sanctuary with what seems like perfect equanimity even though five seconds before church we were all snapping at each other and freaked out because there's no communion bread and the baptistery flooded and Jonathan's parents, who suspect us of being liberal pagan imposters, are in the front pew and Russell's preaching a sermon he entitled (perhaps a tad recklessly) "There is No Hell." Striving for the appearance of stability seems to involve being a little removed, to require some rational detachment.

People are always describing my husband as stable. I've even done it myself. When I first met him I thought he was some sort of Zen master. But I know him really well now, and I know that what appears to be peaceful steadiness is often anxiety, fear, and repression. I like him a lot, probably better than anyone else; I've just realized he's not quite Buddha. And actually Zen masters aren't really all that into the appearance of stability. Huston Smith says,

Entering the Zen outlook is like stepping through Alice's looking glass. One finds oneself in a topsy-turvy wonderland in which everything seems quite mad—charmingly mad for the most part but mad all the same. It is a world of bewildering dialogues, obscure conundrums, stunning paradoxes, flagrant contradictions, and abrupt non sequiturs, all carried off in the most urbane, cheerful, and innocent style. . . . Its uniqueness [lies] in the fact that it is so concerned with the limitations of language and reason that it makes their transcendence the central intent of its method.²

Maybe when we long for stability, straightening, figuring, we are longing for something a bit more inert than life, which is sometimes unbearably ert—tempestuous and unruly. We hold jobs and stay together but fights break out, something in our brain chemistry undoes us, the foundation collapses. Cells are multiplying riotously in my friend's body, growing an aberrant mass that may kill her. Life seems more like uncontrollable streams all intertwined than bedrock.

It's no wonder that the church wants to lend a hand, help solve the equation, promise people a nice and solid firm foundation. That's what we often desperately believe we need. Much of the Christian enterprise is devoted to trying to provide this. But maybe it's not really an unshakable

infrastructure, solid conclusions, or tidiness that we need. And faith isn't actually something that supplies us with immovable ground.

“Faith is not, therefore, a standing, but a being suspended and hanging without ground under our feet” (Karl Barth).³ “Faith begins only there where in the confirmations and concepts, confirmation and concept cease, all assurances and certainty end” (Eduard Thurneysen).⁴ “If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know” (Paul: 1 Corinthians 8:2).

Striving for certainty or the appearance of stability may have more to do with fear of all sorts of things—societal disapproval, impermanence, messiness, life—than with anything very true, or very honest, or even terribly crucial or highly good. It might be more of a cutting off, or a taming, or even a deceit at some level, than a revealing. Nietzsche said, “I call a lie: wanting *not* to see something one does see, wanting not to see something *as* one sees it.”⁵ The church seems often to get involved in that lie a little, as if everything would be better if we could just pretend that reality, life, the world, were less complicated. If we could just rein it all in or come up with a system to explain it simply or pour concrete over steel girders, make believe it can or should be coherent and comprehensible, that would be the solution to life. And maybe we have to do quite a bit of pretending just to get ourselves to go out and make money and obey traffic laws and get our kids to school on time. But life really isn't simple. And I'm sorry if this is not good for the children, if we really cannot provide them with a stable environment. But then again, I'm not. I'm happy they are alive, and I have some inkling of what that might mean: all sorts of raging things.

The clarity of idolatry

I think a lot of what we call faith is actually idolatry. Life is beyond our control, and that's not necessarily what we're after: unruly and uncontrollable life. A solid rock may sound more appealing. The church I grew up in loved the rock rhetoric. It was in the hymnbooks and promotional materials and every sermon. The pastor praised God that we did not have to suffer the shifting sands, children sang about the solid rock on which they stood, teenagers prayed that there would be no waves to knock them off. We were rock people. Life was not full of contradictions, or if it seemed to be, they were only apparent. Bible Baptist Church assured us that we had an absolute, rock hard, unchanging, and perfectly coherent foundation. They also talked a lot about needing to have a personal relationship with Jesus, but though they said "relationship" plenty, this seemed to involve strapping our feet to a boulder more than actually living in a relationship with a God who was truly alive.

Nietzsche accused theologians and philosophers and the church of killing and stuffing whatever they worshiped. He said we threaten the life of what we revere.⁶ Maybe it's because the life itself seems threatening.

The church has always confessed that our concepts of God and our language about God can't adequately express or contain God. And this isn't considered a shortcoming or cause to despair; God is incomprehensibly marvelous, matchless, wonderful. I doubt you could find a church that would say otherwise, and yet we also seem to be, honestly, uncomfortable with the incomprehensibly marvelous. We want to comprehend. I certainly do. I desperately love to comprehend. I want to comprehend fully. Everybody and everything all around me all the time. I'm impatient with

hiddenness. I want to feel like I have a handle on something. But in order to grasp something, to comprehend it, you have to be able to nail it down a little, fix it in your gaze. If it moves, it gets away, it blurs.

Jean-Luc Marion defines idolatry as “the subjection of the divine to the human condition for experience of the divine.” We want the divine available to us. Of course we do, but in order to make it available we “freeze its face.” Obviously, for us Protestants, it’s not so much in a statue. Bible Baptist didn’t have any actual rocks in its vestibule with God’s features carved into them, but we had metaphorical rocks up the wazoo. We had concepts and images and ideas and dogmas about God that were hard and fast and in no way open to negotiation. We wanted to be assured of God’s presence in these concepts, but “by establishing such an availability of the divine within the fixed, if not frozen face,” we “deceitfully but radically eliminate the lofty irruption and undeniable alterity that properly attest the divine. . . . The idol makes the divine available, secures it, and in the end distorts it. Its culmination mortally finishes the divine.”⁷ Reducing the unfathomably gracious, infinitely loving, sweet sublime to something we can grasp is the move of idolatry.

I like to think I’m not a controlling person. I don’t want to control anybody or anything—I just want to comprehend them or it. But I can see how controlling and comprehending might be related. If knowing means “grasping,” well, that puts it in your hands. Nietzsche thought our attempts to understand truth are often more about mastering and controlling it than illuminating it. And they often reduce it more than reveal it. It’s not surprising to me that we tend toward idolatry. Who doesn’t want something that can be grasped, to get a handle on things, to get a rope around it and pull it in? It’s almost like we have idolatry in our

DNA, like we just can't stand to live with something we can't grasp or have some control over, so we fix it, freeze it, pin it down. We get out our rope and lasso and knot and noose until we're pulling on the rope so hard that what may have been at first "bedazzling"⁸ can now be mounted on our wall, more like a neat little package or a stuffed bird than an incomprehensibly wonderful Other. It's no wonder we are relentless idol makers, but it might be better if we didn't call our idolatry *faith*.

Life, for most of us, is not full of clear paths and voices from heaven. Idols help to make up for that deficiency. Life is outrageous. Idols help us know how to proceed. So we form and fashion ideas, beliefs, rules to live by, ways of life, cultural codes. Idols are understandings we cling to that end up taking the place of God. This isn't always an overtly religious project. Some have claimed that the entire Western philosophical tradition is idolatrous.⁹ Idols are concepts and ideas that come to rule the world, or your world. Capitalism or communism or self-help strategies or macrobiotics or punk rock. They help us choose our church, our mates, and what shoes we wear. They help us know what life is permissible or desirable and what life is not, whether we're suburbanites or urbanites or skinnyites or church ladies or revolutionaries. Idols provide us with goals. Idols might make us feel good about ourselves or they might make us feel bad about ourselves; they might tell us how we should look or how we should act or how everyone else should look and act. We probably have little gods by the thousands: The Ideal Body, The Ideal Man, The Good Christian. Idols can be very artistically and beautifully and brilliantly rendered. They can be therapeutic. They can be more or less sophisticated. They can be super smart and creative and sensible, or they can be a bit silly. Idols are the things we cling to (even if it's

a clinging that renounces clinging) and bow down to that are not God. It is hard to imagine what the world would look like without idolatry. It is so prevalent. It is the way the world works.

The idolatry the Hebrew prophets were constantly up in arms about all over the Bible wasn't some senseless and perverse obsession with obviously ridiculous, made-up gods. It wasn't profane activity; it was pretty much the opposite. It was about giving a face to the divine, giving the mystery recognizable features. The people didn't (at least initially) believe that the faces they gave to the divine adequately contained the divine, but the faces they made gave them something clearer to look at. As a kid, I thought idolatry was what I saw in Cecil B. DeMille's film version of *The Ten Commandments*: people dancing madly around the golden calf, all dark and steamy; sweating, whirling bodies; people who were obviously senseless and maybe drugged or drunk or just recklessly sinful in a way I wasn't much afraid of being. But the Israelites weren't drawn away from Yahweh because they were drugged and senseless, but because they longed for the order and availability that burning incense and sacrificing in the "high places" seemed to promise.

At the beginning of each new year in Babylon, the much-denounced idolatrous Babylonians would reenact the creation of the world, the battle of Marduk the Creator and Tiamat the Sea Monster. Tiamat was the uncontrollable, raging chaos that everyone feared. He was the unknown, slithering through the depths of the raging sea. Tiamat was the force that constantly threatens to overflow its banks and destroy civilization, or eat up your children, or swallow whatever fragile stability you've managed to eke out for your life. Tiamat was the ultimate source of anxiety. So every year the Babylonians would reenact the monster's threatening,

and every year the great Marduk would end up defeating it. All the scary out-of-controlness would dissolve into the water, the chaos monster would be defeated once more, and humanity would be rescued from the threatening wild.

The whole thing seems kind of brilliant and beautiful. I want the ultimate source of anxiety to be defeated. I can see participating in a religion that promises security and tries to maintain order. I have done so. Admittedly the reenactment of the threatening chaos at the new year's festival in Babylon involved some things that we don't see in most of our churches: "erotic license, orgies and so on."¹⁰ Occasionally it also involved human sacrifice. But that's not so different from what we do with our religions, is it? Lives must be sacrificed in the service of ideals. This is not an unusual thing to hear people say.

It probably wouldn't have been such a big deal to the prophets of Yahweh if the people of Israel were worshiping plain old, uninteresting, not very compelling rocks. But it wasn't like that. The people didn't think they were worshiping idols when they observed the rites of Baal or danced in front of Marduk; they believed they were doing what was necessary for life—to get food, or find meaning, or bring peace. Mircea Eliade, a religious historian (who was also probably a fascist), talks about these early rituals as a quest to take chaotic space and time and make it sacred. In order to do anything to live, he says, humanity needed to acquire "a fixed point." Without a fixed point, he says, orientation in the world would have seemed impossible.¹¹

Altars and incense and rituals, bowing down to Marduk, helped to orient the people. It was a way to make life feel less out of control, to order the world. The idolatry that the Hebrew prophets railed against wasn't perverse and profane and senseless. It was profoundly religious. If occasionally there

were rocks involved, that makes a lot of sense too. Rocks can be religiously significant in all sorts of ways. They don't change. They are solid and stable. They seem absolute and invulnerable and permanent. Rocks have attractive qualities. Idols aren't just stupid rocks that stupid people worship; they fulfill our longing for something we can grasp, comprehend, something solid we can fix in our gaze.

My Sri Lankan statue

Nell, who goes to my church, recently brought me a Buddha back from Sri Lanka. I love my Buddha. It's not a fat jolly one. It's black and sleek and serene, and it sparkles. I've been carrying it around with me, putting it on my desk when I write and by the sink when I'm making dinner for the kids or washing dishes. I panicked the other day when I couldn't find it. I feel like I'm going to forget to be peaceful without it. I like looking at it. It reminds me to be mindful and not to get irritated with my kids and to talk nicely. The kids are even on to it. When I did get a bit irritable the other night after Olivia drew on the kitchen table with a permanent green Sharpie, she said to me, "Mom, where's your Buddha?"

Nell gave it to me right before church began in a perfect little white box, and all through the service I couldn't resist opening the box and looking at it because it made me so happy. I was trying to be discreet about it, because I thought if Fred Hall sees me acting all in love with my Buddha, he will definitely have some questions for me, and I won't be good with the answers. Fred is a beautiful old pietistic Lutheran who loves Jesus and wants to like House of Mercy but worries when he thinks we stray from the path.

I was immediately attached to my Buddha. Clearly it is no portal for me into the riches of Buddhism, but I like the

weight of it in my hand, and running my fingers over its surface. I like my relationship with my Buddha. It encourages me to be good and serene and control my anger. But it's not really much of a relationship. It's a rock. If it has any transforming qualities, it is because it reminds me of what I already know and what I want to remember. My rock Buddha is very comforting and reassuring and helpful. It helps me to feel oriented. It works. But perhaps it's something altogether different that I really need. I have a feeling that if I had a Zen master, he'd probably throw my Buddha on the ground and smash it to pieces, or dangle it from a fishing rod, or paint it with pink polka dots, something to baffle and bewilder.

Idols aid us, console us, and give us direction. Idolatry makes so much sense that it is surprising that there's such an enormous polemic against the whole enterprise in the Bible. But there really, really is. Scripture devotes an enormous amount of time and space trying to derail it. The Bible is relentlessly anti-idolatrous. And I don't think it's all out of some sort of prudish, narrow-minded, strait-laced, puritanical, rigid, pagan-hating disapproval of certain rituals. I think it's an astounding revelation that however much idolatry seems to secure life, it actually diminishes it. It doesn't make life, it takes it. It may provide stability and orientation, but it is giving our lives to what is not alive. Idolatry is death.

The Other (or the outrageousness of Christianity and love)

There's a weird thing about the Christian faith: faith. It's thoroughly dependent on the existence of an Other who is profoundly alive and always a little outside the sphere of what we know, dependent on something that is not in

our control, something definitely beyond our grasp, beyond grasping. Faith is more about depending on things unseen, things incomprehensible, than it is about making things sacred or ordering our world.

James Alison, a British theologian and Catholic priest, taught a class at our church about faith. I took about a thousand pages of notes. I'm not sure if this is word for word, but it might be (imagine it spoken slowly with a British accent). "Faith," he said, "is not an assent to a set of propositions, an assent to live according to some sort of principle or practice, even—it is a belief in an Other coming towards us and transforming us. It depends on the reliability of that Other. To have faith in God is very different from consenting to an ideology. It's not so much about what we do, but what the Other is doing to us, and how that affects who we are and what we do. It's a belief that we are undergoing something at the hands of an Other that enables us to live differently."

This may be weird and embarrassing and even slightly offensive (given what we usually believe is absolutely necessary for order or peace or to make the world better), but it is also pretty core. If core is even a word that works very well for an Other teeming with life.

There is a tension between faith and religion, one that you see played out over and over again throughout the Bible, with the prophets screaming that God doesn't want your sacrifices and burnt offerings. God wants your steadfast love (whatever that can possibly mean). And Jesus, battling with the Pharisees, the purveyors of religion, insists that everything hangs on this one thing: love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself (whatever that can possibly mean).

Faith is not ordering our lives according to principles we can firmly grasp, it's being transformed in ways we probably

don't even have any idea we need to be, by a living Other who is always outside our grasp—a God who is profoundly, wildly, radically, maybe practically unbearably alive. And we are created, sustained, and redeemed by our relationship with the living God, not by our valiant and sometimes beautiful and sometimes violent and horrible attempts to make order or meaning or to control or comprehend. We are redeemed by the love of God. That is pretty much at the core of any orthodox Christianity. It is enormously important to faith, and it is a very wild claim: it's not the things (systems, ideologies, ideas) we are attached to that will give us life, save us, redeem us, but the love of the living God.

Love

It's hard to even talk about love without sounding corny and trite and sentimental and naive, without feeling just a little silly and romancey and young and like you don't know what you're talking about. Probably this is because we don't know what we're talking about most of the time when we talk about love. Maybe because love is not entirely comprehensible. But it seems like you can hardly hear the biblical witness or the historical witness of the church without hearing about love.

Bruce Benson, in his book *Graven Ideologies*, says, “Reflecting on our potential for idol creation can be an overwhelming and even frightening exercise. Not only are we capable of creating idols and worshiping them, we are likewise capable of being almost or completely blind to their existence.”¹² He says idols are “subtle and elusive . . . constantly developing and shifting in identity. Just when we recognize them and take aim, they can take on a different form.”¹³ We can hardly speak about God without spitting

out an idol every other second; sometimes it seems like we hardly know how to think or act without idols to guide us. Idols help us to order and categorize and calculate. Love, however, resists calculation, order, or category. Idols contain, while love, says Benson, “is profligate.”¹⁴

This isn’t a problem or shortcoming of love. Benson quotes Marion as saying, “Love does not suffer from the unthinkable or from the absence of conditions, but is reinforced by them.”¹⁵ In trying to imagine what might be outside of idolatry, some of the most erudite and untrite and un-naïve thinkers come pretty close to talking about what I think we’re talking about when we talk about love. Heidegger writes about “non-objectifying thinking” and “poetic thinking.” Benson quotes Heidegger as saying, “Poetic thinking is being in the presence of . . . and for the god. Presence means: simple willingness that wills nothing, counts on no successful outcome.”¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas speaks about “knowing otherwise than according to knowledge.”¹⁷ Marion speaks of a call that comes “from outside of me” and “displaces me as center of my world.”¹⁸ Whereas our systems are often founded on the notion that morality, justice, and right action are rationally calculable, Derrida recognizes that, though we must calculate, “justice escapes all calculation. . . . Choices, on Derrida’s view, cannot be made in a mechanical, calculable, programmable way.”¹⁹

Love isn’t much like rock-hard certainty. A firm foundation doesn’t even sound quite right. Love and relationship seem very different from order and coherence and simplicity. A loving relationship may be constant and enduring, never-ending, but even so, *stable* and *coherent* and *simple* are not words that describe it very well. Maybe there’s not so much stability as we’d like. Maybe the foundation isn’t quite as firm as we’d like. Maybe what holds us is love, and though it

might not guarantee us security or control or comprehension, it is the most hopeful and transforming possibility.

Like a rolling stone

I feel sometimes like I love my idols—ideas that I see clearly, ideologies that seem brilliant to me, things I cling to in order to feel secure, my rock Buddha, my most precious constructs, and Bob Dylan. Maybe not so much now, but there was a time.

I'd been in Oregon for a year in the mountains surrounded by big trees and wild places, and I was preparing to head home to flat Indiana. Some boy I was into at the time, some boy with long hair and a VW van, recorded all his Dylan albums for me on cassette tapes so I might head to the domesticated Midwest with a voice of undomestication. The boy was very into Dylan and very into telling me everything he knew about him and convincing me of his genius. He piled books of interviews, books with pictures, books of lyrics on my front seat. All day I'd drive listening to the cassettes, and at night I'd lie on the scratchy sheets in the Motel Six or the Broken Spoke Inn with the doors double locked and read interviews.

When everyone was saying what a brilliant poet Dylan was, someone asked him if he thought of himself as primarily a poet. Dylan said, "No . . . the word doesn't mean any more than the word 'house.' There are people who write *poems* and people who write *poems*. Other people write *poems*. . . . I don't call myself a poet because I don't like the word. I'm a trapeze artist."²⁰ He said, "Chaos is a friend of mine. It's like I accept him, does he accept me. Truth is chaos. Maybe beauty is chaos."²¹ *Playboy* magazine asked him about long hair and he said, "If you figure it out, you realize that all of

one's hair surrounds and lays on the brain inside your head. Mathematically speaking, the more of it you can get out of your head, the better. People who want free minds sometimes overlook the fact that you have to have an uncluttered brain. Obviously, if you get your hair on the outside of your head, your brain will be a little more freer."²²

By the time I got to Indiana, after about a hundred straight hours with the cowboys and angels and dwarves and midg-ets and Eskimos, I actually felt completely and totally like I loved Bob Dylan. Me and five hundred thousand other people, I know, and I was behind the times, but it wasn't just some dumb little thing. Listening to Bob Dylan was like having all the hilarity and absurdity and ambivalence and beauty of life distilled into music. It felt like everything about me—my senses, brain, heart—opened up in some sort of passionate, intense, beautiful, expansive way. I felt some sort of urgency, about what I'm not sure, but I could hardly sit still. It was like fire.

But actually, I don't love Bob Dylan. I mean, how could I use that word when I don't have any genuine contact with a real live living other? I don't really know him. I just know his magnificence and his brilliance. I am attracted to his beauty, but I've never felt his skin. I have no idea what he smells like. He's not alive to me. Not really. And he doesn't know me. I actually don't have a relationship with Bob Dylan. Whatever sort of thing I have, it's not horrible and depraved, but it's more like idolatry than like love. And idolatry and love are really different.

There is no such thing as love outside of relationship. Karl Barth talks about love as what is revealed to us by "God seeking and creating fellowship with us." *Fellowship* may seem like an off-putting word, but it's God's desire to be with us, related to us. Love is God creating relationship, communion.

And that relationship, love, includes a lot, maybe everything that is. Barth says, “There is death and hell,” whatever that means, “in the scope of this relationship.”²³ And loving your neighbor, he says, is not so much helping them out as being pressed up against them in your fellow humanity. And that involves a lot. “Mortal headaches,” he says, their impotence and misery and futility exposing your impotence and misery and futility.²⁴ Father Zossima says, “Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams.”²⁵ Love is almost like reverse idolatry.

Love isn’t some discrete thing or feeling that you have or don’t have. There’s not a thing-y quality to it. It’s not at all static. I’m not even sure if it’s simply something you do or you don’t do. It’s more like, are you involved with an other or are you not?—with all the tons of things being involved means. I don’t think love is one sort of feeling you have, or even one sort of action. It’s like communion. It’s being all tangled up, in a mess even, more than maintaining a stable position toward someone. Love is not like unconditional positive regard. Who could ever live with someone and have that? The people I regard most, I regard in innumerable ways, not all of them nice and pretty.

I mean, I sort of hate to say this, but I think I might feel more consistently positive about Bob Dylan than I do about my kids. This is what it’s like for me to be alive with my children: I wake up in the morning and they are gorgeous to me instantly and I feel enormous things that I can’t even explain, and we get through breakfast and they are delightful, and then Olivia accidentally spits toothpaste at Miles and there’s five minutes left before they have to get picked up for school, and Miles spits toothpaste back and they are behaving like mean and crazy animals and I feel heat and intense screaminess, and they seem to feel the same to me and it’s

intense dislike all around for a while. They get out the door finally, and I do the dishes. When they get home, I'm happy to see them—and every day we do the same sorts of things over and over again. Beauty. Anger. Fighting. Judging, even judging. Communicating. Not communicating.

Love is living (which is outrageous and inexplicable and not very coherent or simple) in relationship (which is often incredibly wild and beautiful and scary and sad and occasionally strangely mundane) to a living other who is always other, not far off and distant but definitely other than you, uncontrollable and incomprehensible, but revealing. Love may be more disturbing than stabilizing, more like intimacy than admiration, more like struggle than reverence.

Worshipping an idol is far simpler and less chaotic and more consistently pleasant than tangling with an uncontrollable other. It is no wonder at all that we are obsessive idol makers. Idolatry makes the mundane sacred. It's something that can give you a sense of equanimity and make you feel good, instead of something that wracks your gut and involves all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, which, c'mon, just has to involve a lot of craziness and darkness and blindness and anger and, I guess, just about everything we are—animal meanness, beautiful sweetness, sickness and blood and unbelievable gorgeousness. But it's a lot. Jeez.

It's surprising that the Bible talks so much about what we have with God as love. From a lot of what you hear, you might expect God to be above all that. Perfectly holy, beyond such sordid and ignoble goings-on, removed from this messy tangle, and untouchable. But to say that God is wholly Other doesn't mean that God is unrelated, far away. Ungraspable, uncategorizable, yes, but not untouchable. That God is Other doesn't mean that God resides far away

in a castle in the sky wearing white gloves, peering down his nose at us from his faraway perch. “Clearly [God] ‘is’ in a very different sense from the way the world or human beings ‘exist,’” says James Alison.²⁶ “Part of the genius of monotheistic Judaism [is] the realization that ‘one God’ is much more like ‘no god at all’ than like ‘one of the gods.’”²⁷ God is very other, much more other than any other others. But as Barth says, that otherness very much involves God’s being related to us. That the other cannot be comprehended or apprehended or made available to us when and where and how we demand does not mean the other cannot be close. In fact, Marion writes:

Between God and man, incommensurability alone makes intimacy possible, . . . duality alone allows recognition, communion progresses within the separation wherein gazes are exchanged. Distance: only he can become my neighbor who remains forever outside of me and my doubles. Only he can stand with me who stands before me. . . . Distance buttresses the one against the other until they bless one another.²⁸

Reading the Bible, you get the impression that faith in God, relationship with God, is more an intimate sort of tangling with the uncontrollable, even unnamable Yahweh than a neat solution or a removed worship. Jacob wrestles, Abraham haggles, the Israelites resist, the prophets wail and beat their chests.

To believe in a God who actually lives and is actually in relationship to us is much weirder than believing in an ideology. More uncomfortable, perhaps even slightly absurd. So I think a lot of times the church makes loving God seem more like the coherent simplicity of worshiping an idol, something that can be neatly prescribed. Like it has to do with a sacred place where you light candles, or it has to do

with getting our lives in order, or it's somehow just more like the Bob Dylan thing, a sort of removed admiration, than it is like being all tangled up with a living other.

It might be in part because the tangle seems like a lot and idolatry is more appealing, and it might be in part because it doesn't feel like a real relationship with God is possible. As if the only option we have with God is a sort of removed worship, since we don't smell God or fight with God. I've never felt God's skin. I haven't seen God wake up in the morning and spit toothpaste. I think it might actually seem like we can't relate to God as an Other, we can only relate to god as an idol, because how on earth do I really, really tangle with an unseen God? I feel like I want to, like bring it on, man. Give me something to tangle with, and I'll tangle, but I need a little more sensory input. I don't want to make an idol to grasp, but I'd like to feel *something* in my hands. If there were just something I could actually grab by the sleeve, or throw in the dirt, or kiss, then I wouldn't need my idols.

I don't think it always seems like we have an actual, real, live, full relationship with God. But the witness of the Bible, the witness of the church, is fairly adamant that we do. We live because God breathes God's breath into our nostrils. We are created, sustained, and redeemed by that breath. We are actually in relationship with God more profoundly than we are in relationship with anything or anyone else. It's just not graspable. It's not comprehensible. I can't get ahold of it, not because it isn't concrete or real or sensory, but because it isn't graspable. I can't comprehend it, not because God is not with us, but because God is with us so thoroughly. I can't quite see it clearly, not because it's not all around me all the time, but because I can't fix it in my gaze. We can't grasp it, not because it's not there, but because God is the most profoundly alive, unfixable thing there is. A presence

so enormous, so permeating, so thorough, that it's mistaken for absence.

Marion says, "The unthinkable enters into the field of our thought only by rendering itself unthinkable there by excess."²⁹ We cannot comprehend God's presence, not because it is somehow lacking, but because of its surplus, "which neither concept, signification, nor intention can foresee, organize or contain."³⁰ We're tangling with the Other nonstop all the time. It's what is all along creating, sustaining, and redeeming us. We don't live or breathe or walk or talk outside of our relationship with God. We are so tangled in it, so thoroughly and completely in it, we can't comprehend it. It comprehends us. This is all outrageous and odd and pretty much the central point of Christianity. We live by the grace of God.

We seem to have idolatry in our DNA. But maybe at the deepest level we are not idolaters; we are people who need relationship. We are created in and for communion. We need love and relationship to breathe. But somehow, allowing ourselves to enter into communion, or to be who we really are, is more difficult or scary or unsettling than giving our lives to our belief systems, cultural codes, ideologies—our idols that aren't alive. And our idolatry freezes and fixes and suffocates and knots and nooses and guts and stuffs and kills. The Bible witnesses, however, to a God who keeps calling us into life; keeps creating life, life, and more life, bringing life from barren wombs and shoots out of dead stumps; actually resurrecting. This may seem like a bit much, but the Bible presses on and on: God is a God of life. James Alison talks about the sort of power that characterizes God as that of "being completely and entirely alive, living without any reference to death. There is no death in God. God has nothing to do with death." Alison refers to God as "God,

the entirely death-less.”³¹ And it seems like God wants us to come along with him or her in this deathlessness. What could God be thinking, calling us into everlasting life? It might seem more responsible of God to call us to a simple coherent system, to organize a schedule of burnt offerings, to give us a way to redeem ourselves by following orders or rules or whatever, instead of redeeming us in relationship through love. It’s frustrating. It’s gorgeous. No wonder we are relentless idol makers, but God calls us to life.

The Bible witnesses to the entirely deathless one, to the living Word. It calls us to relationship with the Other. The Bible points us to this tangle. But often instead of allowing it to point us there, we use it somehow to get out of the tangle. It’s both unbelievable and not at all surprising that we do this—we’re dying for certainty and stability and a firm place to stand. But believing that’s what we have in the Bible, in the Word of God, we mistake the summons of the living God for a rock, and our relationship to scripture becomes more like idolatry than a living response to a living being.