

The Peril and Promise of Holy Love

Co-Missioners,

Our writer this week is Carol Braun, a former co-editor of Thursday Theology. Carol also served for a while on the Crossing Board. She was featured about a month ago in the first episode of Crossings' latest film series, "God's Peace / God's Justice." To learn more of who she is and what she does these days, [check it out](#).

Again a reminder that a Crossings reading group is set to launch today. If you're reading this in the afternoon of Thursday, you'll have missed the opening session. You're certainly welcome to come along in two weeks for session #2. That topic that day, July 28, will be Chapter 2 of Robert Bertram's *A Time for Confessing*. It's [available at Amazon in Kindle format](#) if you can't find a hard copy. To join the group, drop a note to [Pr. Scott Benolkin](#).

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

The Peril and Promise of Holy Love

by Carol Braun



My first son, Solomon, was born in February 2015, in a charming little birth center attached to the hospital and across from the county fairgrounds. Soon after his birth came a snowstorm, of which I was dimly aware as a whitish glow outside the windows of the room where he and I spent his first few days, waiting for his jaundice to clear. I settled into a routine for being a mom in that little room, with the daily breakfast down the hall and the dependable trays of lunch and dinner, the helpful nurses and the cocoon of quiet snow around us. Then came the time to take him home; my husband picked us up and we strapped Solomon into his little car seat. Then my husband drove back to work and I was sitting in the middle of the living room of my otherwise empty house, holding my baby and wondering the same thing new parents everywhere wonder on that first day home. How is this going to work now?

It ended up working just fine. I was rather stunned, though, by the time and effort required to keep a newborn alive and

healthy. My regard for my own mother, which was already high, cranked up about ten more notches. The sheer amount of time spent nursing, for example, was a surprise. I remember thinking, in sleep-deprived awe, what a wonder it was that every single grown person who ever walked the earth had someone who did essentially this for them in their early days—this intensive stretch of feeding and diapering and comforting and soothing to sleep. For some reason I dwelt on the infant Isaac Newton: how there would have been no grown-up Isaac Newton had there not first been Isaac Newton's mother at his tiny beck and call, hour after hour, keeping him alive.

All this was a happy burden—one my husband and I had taken on deliberately and gratefully. It was made lighter by the help we had from our parents, who took turns visiting. It was also made lighter by a gift entirely beyond my control that arrived, not quite on that first day home but a couple nights later. I was lying awake in bed while Solomon slept in his crib down the hall. And suddenly I was giddy with how sweet and perfect he was. I felt it in my wrists



and ankles. I thought, "Gosh, I can't wait to see him again." And then I think I must have laughed out loud at the pure, unexpected delight of it: "Ah! I know what *this* is," I thought. "I've fallen in love!"

Of course I'd loved him all along, since before he was born, but this was specific, particular, intense, transcendent. It bowled me over, as such things always do. It happened again when his brother was born two years later, again not quite on the first night home but soon after.

Now my boys are five and three, and fewer of my waking hours are spent doting on their sweetness and perfection. Still, the work of parenting is leavened every day by a love as powerful and transcendent as anything in my life. This love isn't a virtue, it's a gift. It arrives unbidden; we can't take any credit for it; it bowls us over from time to time and also holds us steady as other things knock us around.

The love between my husband and me, and between us and our children, feels sometimes like enough to sustain us, for example, through the uncertainty of a global pandemic. In some ways it's like we're back at the birth center, the four of us now in our own little lockdown cocoon, focused more or less inward most of the time and maybe just dimly aware of the storm outside.

And sometimes I think, love like this—not just for spouse or children or parents but human love in all its forms—could be enough to fill a life. And then I think vaguely of the rich man and the eye of the needle, but with a wealth of love instead of gold.

In his brilliant book *Seculosity*, David Zahl digs into the secular religions that have risen up to fill the void left behind as capital-R Religion has receded in cultural

prominence—pursuits and practices that seek to fulfill “the needs...for hope, purpose, connection, justification, enoughness” which “haven’t diminished as churches have become taprooms and theaters” (Zahl, xix). He coins the term ‘seculosity’ to mean “religiosity that’s directed horizontally rather than vertically, at earthly rather than heavenly objects,” with the term ‘secular’ here used as “a descriptor of any setting in which a belief in God is not axiomatic” (Zahl, xxi).

Zahl devotes one chapter of *Seculosity* to romance, and another to children. (Other chapters cover work, food, politics, and so on.) In the chapter on romance he notes, “Romantic love...is the closest most of us will get to transcendence in this life and, as such, is the single best approximation of salvation available to the human creature” (Zahl, 27). No wonder, then, that such love can serve as a kind of secular religion. Zahl’s focus is self-justification: we make a secular religion of romance and children when we use them as a means to a self-centered end—namely, that of proving our own worth, our “enoughness,” by proving for example that we’re lovable enough to get a boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse, or that we’re good enough parents to have healthy and successful and well-rounded children.

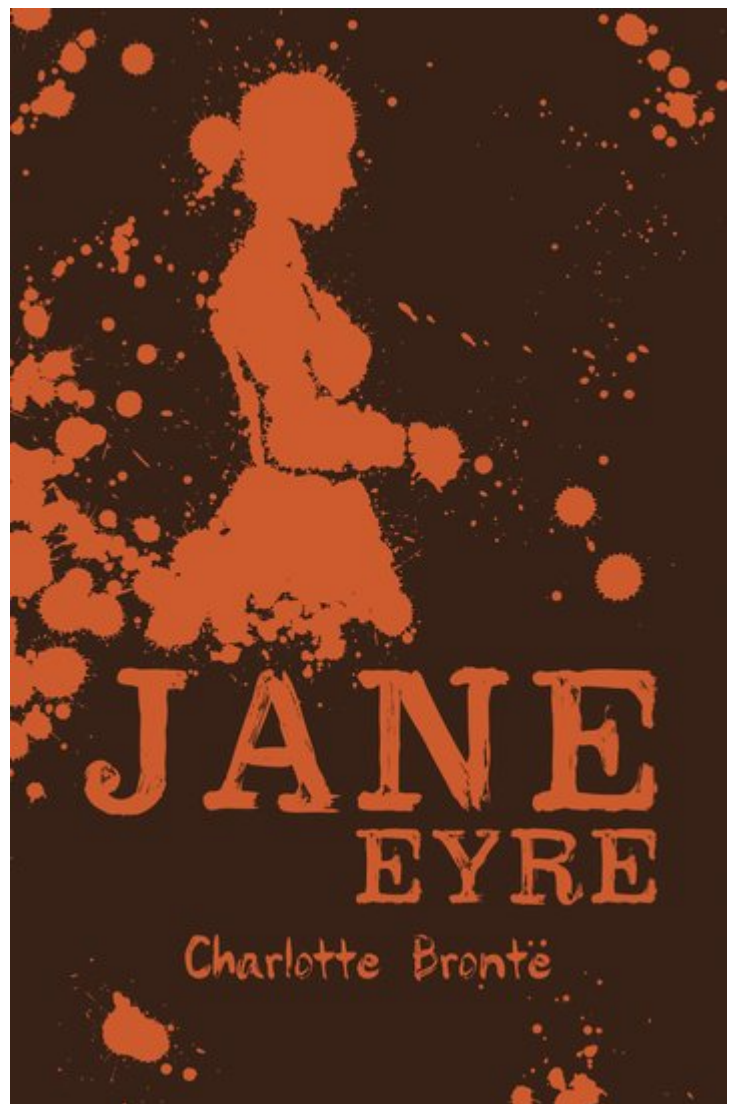
Back in January, when conferences were still a thing, I had the great benefit of hearing Zahl speak on his notion of seculosity at the Crossings conference. His remarks (available in audio form [here](#)) were as brilliant and insightful as his book. He began by clarifying that seculosity is all about self-justification, in contrast to idolatry, which is all about worship. And it struck me that my vague eye-of-a-needle anxieties about the role of human love in my life were perhaps more about idolatry than self-justification.

Some months ago I came across the following passage, quoted in a scholarly article, from [a sermon by John Wesley](#) (PDF) on the last

verse of 1 John ("Little children, keep yourselves from idols."):

Setting then pagan and Romish idols aside, what are those of which we are here warned by the Apostle? ... the idolizing a human creature. Undoubtedly it is the will of God that we should all love one another. ... Let this be carefully considered, even by those whom God has joined together; by husbands and wives, parents and children. ... How frequently is a husband, a wife, a child, put in the place of God. ... They seek their happiness in the creature, not in the Creator. ... Now if this is not flat idolatry, I cannot tell what is. (Wesley, as quoted at Searle p. 43.)

The article quoting this passage is by Alison Searle, a literary scholar, whose topic at hand is the role of idolatry and imagination in Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*, which has been a favorite of mine since I had to read it for English class in high school. It's a novel crammed with biblical allusion and worldview—its closing lines, for example, quote the end of the book of Revelation: "'Surely I come quickly.' Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!" And on my reading, and Searle's, it's fundamentally the story of first a girl, then a young woman, who loves passionately



and tries to build her life on the bonds of human love—first love of friends and family-like attachments and then, overwhelmingly, romantic love—and who must eventually learn to reorder those loves within the context of the love of God before she can get her happy ending. (Other aspects of the story's resolution are, alas, more problematic.) In one of the more memorable passages at a crucial turning point of the novel, the heroine, Jane, echoes the same language from Romans 1:25 that shows up in the passage from Wesley:

My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol. (Brontë, 241)

This, surely, is to be avoided.

When Jesus' disciples asked him which was the most important commandment in the law, he answered them, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment" (Matt. 22:37). Not for nothing, he follows up with "a second like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (22:38). But still, the ordering is clear. First, God; then, neighbor.

The thing is, I sometimes wonder, can I really love the Lord my God with all my heart and soul and mind when he feels, often, so distant, silent, invisible, inscrutable? In *Hunting the Divine Fox*, Robert Farrar Capon—in his lead-up to an extended meditation on the love between God and humans through the image of a romantic love affair—notes that "God is notoriously silent.... He runs the world not only with his hands in his pockets but with his mouth mostly shut" (Capon, 274).

And when my loved ones are physically present here in the world, able to be seen and touched and heard and spoken to and interacted with directly, and when my love for them is so powerful, can I help myself from making that love central in my heart, and losing sight of the love of God? Or, if not losing sight, then at least making it an afterthought, acknowledged in morning and evening prayers but forgotten over the course of the day?

Fortunately, I'm not doomed to wrestle my heart into shape on my own. On the basis of Jesus' loving sacrifice, I find confidence to ask for God's help in turning my heart toward him in all things, and I trust that he'll send his Spirit to help me. I take comfort too in the very fact of Jesus' incarnation, and his exhortation that we love one another. The Gospel of John acknowledges the invisibility of God that sometimes feels to me such an impediment: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18). The God of the bible didn't leave us floundering and hold us at a distance; he inserted himself into human history—ultimately and most directly through Jesus, who entered the world just like the rest of us, a tiny baby in need of feeding and washing and soothing to sleep, himself an active and direct participant in human love.



This theme of invisible God and embodied love is picked up again and extended in the First Letter of John: “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:11-12). In this too, I find great help. I don’t need to love the people around me less so as to love God

more. Surely I should watch out for letting the love of humans supplant the love of God; but when I understand the love of humans in terms of the love of God, I can reintegrate these loves into my life and see God as the source and substance of them all.

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