



Texts in Context

The Healing Power of Love in the “Tragic Gap” (1 Corinthians 13:1–13)

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We were deep in the earth surrounded by huge boulders and the sounds of only our footsteps and occasional nervous laughter. The small lamps on our hard hats provided the only light along the narrow path of uneven stone. Ahead of me, other spelunkers were scaling an enormous rounded rock with no apparent footholds. My much taller husband was having no trouble ascending and descending the rocky “trail.” When I approached the formidable obstacle, I could see no way up or over. I was stuck in the gap with only darkness behind me. In that moment, I felt helpless, as if I had no power. Recalling that moment in Carlsbad Caverns in southern New Mexico provides a vivid image of one inescapable aspect of the human condition: in that space I came face to face with my powerlessness and my profound need for help beyond my own ability.

Have you ever felt as I did in that moment? As if you have no power? If so, that’s because you don’t! What I mean is, you don’t have any power when it comes to shaping what appears on your path, or how others will react along the way. You can’t control the social events, economic shifts, or other crises that may suddenly rise up like boulders before you. Nor can you anticipate which illness, grief, or burden in need of healing will present itself and leave you feeling stuck in the gap.

You do have *some* power, of course. You have the power to make choices about your response. You have the headlights of belief and prayer and action to

What do we do in the “tragic gap” between what is and what we want or hope the world to be? Paul has a one-word answer: love.

shine on the path. You have the relational power of trust, both given and earned. They are all limited, these powers. Like helmets, boots, and gloves in a cave, they can only do so much, but they are yours in some measure. As I learned in that cave ten years ago, we also have the sometimes hidden power of community, fellow travelers keeping us on track and calling us back when we lose our footing or meet obstacles on the way of faithfulness. When we find ourselves in the gap, we also have the power of God's love in Christ, which makes possible genuine healing and wholeness.

SEEING THE TRAGIC GAP

I stood in the gap facing the insurmountable-looking boulder. I could see others climbing, but I could not imagine how my five-foot-four-inch frame would ever reach the top. The way ahead, where others were climbing, presented a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to my physical limitations, and heightened my rising sense of panic. There was no turning back. Only darkness and total uncertainty lay behind me. In my anxiety, I had no idea what possibilities were already present.

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As we enter the text of 1 Cor 13, ancient poetry invites us to explore the power of love available in Christ, to consider how we live with deficits of power that frustrate Christian community, and to discern our means for living in that space between what is and what we can envision for ourselves and others. Parker Palmer calls this space between what is (the actual) and what we want or hope the world to be (the ideal) the “tragic gap.”¹ It is one of numerous gaps in the human condition. It is tragic not mainly because it is sad, but because it is unresolvable. The gaps between individual persons, within our self-understanding, and between people and social groups are all tragic in this sense.²

Living in the space of the tragic gap, once we become aware of it, can be a mighty uncomfortable place. I recently led a conversation with group of theological educators in which we considered the space of the gap. After several hours of discussion and list making, they concluded that I left them “dangling Indiana-Jones-like over the tragic gap.” The image captures the absurdity and impossibility of the space but also its adventure and creative possibility.

Consider the church. Faith communities are places in which the tragic gap is evident at every turn. Old rivalries hover near the coffee pot at social hour, and ancient grudges wait just around the corner in the fellowship hall. Differences of

¹Parker J. Palmer, *Hidden Wholeness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004) 174–177.

²Although each gap is worthy of extended consideration, the focus in this essay remains on the one most directly addressed by Paul to the Corinthians: the space between what is and what could be. Edward Farley explores at length the tragic structure of human existence with attention to the basic drives that are irreconcilably at odds within, between, and among us. See Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 99 and passim.

opinion are gathered up in folded arms and raised eyebrows. Communities of faith are also communities of skepticism, doubt, and lingering hurt. Yet we can see the possibilities of grace, forgiveness, and healing—the potential for faith, hope, and love. Still we cannot escape the tragic gap between what is and what could be. The Corinthian Christians to whom Paul wrote his first-century letter knew this kind of separation and alienation from each other. He pleads with them not to take sides and argue (1:10–12), not to act jealously like children (3:3), and not to cheat and sue one another (6:4–8). Paul’s list of worries over the failures of community sounds little different from those of twenty-first-century churches.

It is enough to make one feel powerless.

As I stood contemplating the large boulder and seeing no real way out, I began to second-guess my decision. What had I been thinking to agree to a “wild cave tour”? Why didn’t I just stay on the nice, wide, clearly marked paths that tourists take? Maybe it was a need to test my own courage or see what a risk would bring? Standing in the dark gap, I had basically no idea why I’d said yes.

Just descending willingly into one of these tragic gaps rather than taking sides, giving up in despair, or denying its existence takes unusual courage. Yet this relational space is not merely a place of powerlessness, it is also a place of great possibility. Our initial responses when we recognize the canyon or cave into which we have descended may not be encouragement at the possibilities so much as a desire to escape. Parker Palmer says we can become jaded and cynical, giving up in despair, when faced with the gap.³ We lament the impossibility of change: just stop going to the social hour after worship, tune out during the sermon, head home and avoid that miserable rivalry. Or we can fight: give in to that primitive part of the brain that pushes us to rail against pain and discomfort, head into that fellowship hall loaded for bear. Whatever offends or annoys, just shoot it down and ask questions later. Or we may go with flights of cynicism or denial: don’t get close enough to risk anything new or real. All will be well “in the sweet by and by.” Just smile and drink your coffee, and pretend it never happened.

None of these are appealing options. Neither weeping in despair nor laughing in denial will make for a ministry of healing to the man who sits in front of us and cries because his child died, or the marriage that is dissolving, or the homeless woman who needs her medication, or the scores of others who will show up asking for our help. And what of our own souls? How can we possibly live in such a space, aware of its irreconcilability and our own finitude, with any measure of grace or comfort? What then shall we do?

BECOMING A HEALING COMMUNITY

While standing at the foot of the boulder wondering how I could possibly make it over, something surprising happened to me. My husband helped lift me

³Palmer, *Hidden Wholeness*, 175–177. Palmer also describes the fight-or-flight response to the stresses of standing in the gap.

from below, and a guide took my hand from above. Together we all worked to help me, and everyone else in the group, transcend the gap. I was not left there to die or even left until the group returned that way some hours later. What happened? Most simply put, community happened. And in those simple gestures of lifting and hand-holding, a moment of communal grace was enacted. The community brought to me what I never could have rendered alone.

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The call to live in a healing community of faith will take us into profound awareness of the space that we are describing as a “tragic gap.” Each time we meet each other face to face and hear a personal story of pain or crisis, our primitive brains will again urge us to respond with fight or flight. We will leap to solve the problem, give easy advice, make six referrals, and work with all our might to overcome the gap between what actually exists in this person’s life and what we can ideally envision it to be. Other times we will feel ourselves sinking into despair that no possible way out exists, that the tragic gap is a bottomless abyss, and we are falling into it head over heels. Or we’ll throw hands in the air, and our flight instinct will take us to the nearest sports arena, or all-you-can eat buffet, or corner pub to drown our pain and medicate it right out of existence. Still other times we may be tempted to offer cheap grace or quick reassurance. We’ll find ourselves saying, “Time heals all wounds” or “Everything will be okay” or, most insulting of all, “It must be God’s will.” But if we succumb to dispensing cheap grace, our denial will cut us off from community and any possibility of genuine healing. We will miss the places where both deep pain and joy dwell. It will be a shallow community and an even shallower life we lead. What then shall we do?

First we must reconceive the gap. It is and always will be tragic, but it is also a place of creativity, a place where maturity and wisdom grow, a place where possibility plays, and a place where grace does its healing work. It is a space where community itself emerges, not just spontaneously or simply as it did in the cavern for me, but in long faithful practice. It is a place where the loving Spirit of God dwells and invites us to live. How can it be all of these things?

In 1 Cor 12, Paul says healing is among the most desirable and important gifts from God’s Spirit. Along with a dozen other gifts, it is given to members of the body of Christ for the salvation and healing of all. Yet, Paul says, beyond these gifts there is something more: “a more excellent way” (12:31 KJV). Then Paul waxes poetic in 1 Cor 13 about the tragic gap. He tells us how love lives there and how we might live in love that leads to healing and wholeness.

In the first three verses, Paul envisions one of the most persistent gaps of human existence. Between mortals and angels, Paul shows us the irreconcilability of

our earthy, embodied, material, and temporal lives in contrast to the mysterious, spiritual, and transcendent powers that are also available to us. Between these realities of our lives is an internal gap between our experience and the language after which we grasp so that we might find meaning in that experience. Paul says our denial or giving away of body and possessions without love is nothing. Perfect understanding of the spiritual realm and all its language of transcendence without love is nothing. The back and forth between these parts of ourselves, says Paul, is just clanging and banging, without love in the gap.

In the next three verses (4–6), Paul reveals how the gap between self and others can be a space of alienation and despair. Both self-doubt and self-exaggeration can live there. When I think I am unworthy of the other, I feel irritable and envious, and act rudely. When I fool myself into thinking I am better than others, then I feel resentful, rejoicing in their downfall, and I act arrogantly. The shared space between us is corrupted when we misperceive the gaps and live without love. Yet, when I live in that very same gap with God’s love in Christ, I find new ways to be patient and kind and to rejoice in the fullness of life lived authentically in love. This love that Paul imagines is not short-lived, no temporary smile pasted over deeper resentment or a kind word that hides jealousy. This love is something that endures (vv. 7–8), something that transcends our human condition.

Paul writes in verse 9, “For we know in part, and we prophesy in part” (KJV). That is *what is*. That is the deficit of life: the irreconcilability of it all, the gravity of the gap that pulls us down. He says, “But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away” (13:10 KJV). This is Paul’s vision of what *could be*: the possibility, the promise, the hope of something more, better, different, perfect. Between these two is the tragic gap. Paul says it is like seeing life “through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (13:12 KJV). Until recently I’ve read—or remembered in the traditional King James language—that portion of the passage to mean some distant future. I thought “but then” meant a time when all creation would be reconciled to God, and we would see God and our fellow human beings face to face, a time when all hatred, injustice, and sin would be blotted out by God’s love, in the sweet by-and-by. But lately I’m thinking of a new way to understand it. *But then*. But then *can* be used to indicate the future. However, it can also be part of portraying two possible future stories: I want to go out to eat tomorrow evening, *but then* I’d also like to stay home and cook. And “but then” can also be used to indicate two present situations or feelings. I feel delighted to see you, *but then* I also feel angry about our last disagreement.⁴

I think we can read Paul to say *now we know in part*: everything is partial, incomplete, irreconcilable, and tragic. *But then we also see face to face*: everything is already complete, possible, and perfect now, because that also is what it is. We live in a tragic gap where both ways of seeing are genuine and present, not just sepa-

⁴Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 40–41. Lester describes the role future stories play in constructing identity and motivating decisions in the present.

rated by time. And now things can be understood and envisioned in both ways, and we are stuck between these two visions: in the tragic gap where finitude and possibility both dwell. What then shall we do?

Paul has a one-word answer: love. Live in the tragic gap with love, with charity. Love is long on suffering. When our neighbor comes to tell us about his son in jail, about her mother who has cancer, about his mental illness, we must listen in love. Dip down into the tragic gap and listen. We will not overcome it, but we must stick with it, so that grace and love have time to show up out of the depths.

When we find ourselves in the gap with our fellow travelers, we may resort to envy or pride. Paul warns against these. We are tempted to trivialize their problems or dwell in strange pride that only we know real suffering. We are even provoked to think evil, not just of the other, but of ourselves. We say: Surely, I cannot handle this person's problem. It is too big. It is too shameful, too scary. Someone else will have to do it. I can't be any help, any consolation, any love. And we sell ourselves and our Christian callings short. So what then shall we do?

LIVING INTO TRUST, MATURITY, AND CREATIVITY

My risk in taking the wild cave tour through twists, turns, two-foot crevasses and house-sized boulders led to a surprising moment of spontaneous community. It also led to amazing spaces of beauty and wonder: footprints many decades old of early explorers, caverns the size of sanctuaries, rarely seen by human eyes, and the deepest, darkest dark imaginable, the very soul of the earth's inner mystery. Mysteries of earth and hearts and community abound. We are unlikely, however, to see them unless we take the risk of stepping off the familiar paths and into the gaps and fissures of the human condition. Only there will we find a deeper sense of divine mystery and love.

Can we live with love, live as love itself in the tragic gap? Can we live the love of Christ in spaces replete with separation and alienation from our fellow human beings? Can we hold together finitude and possibility in the same space? Can we seek to live creatively, trustingly, growing in maturity between what is and what we can see all in the same space? Can we sit patiently with fellow believers and their problems, as small as choosing carpet and as large as war? Can we bear all things that come into our hearing? Can we believe all things spoken to us in confidence? Can we endure all things—even those that attract or repulse us, that distract and bore us, that frighten and devastate us? Can we hope all things in the midst of both overwhelming and underwhelming stories? Can we hold out hope and offer healing as we stand with love in the tragic gap?

This is our problem as people of faith: we are powerless in the face of so much. Yet into this tragic gap we are called to stand as priests to each other, bearing burdens small and large and walking through endless combinations of feeling, story, and dilemma.⁵ And this is our challenge: neither to flee nor to gloss over, nor

⁵Carlyle Marney, *Priests to Each Other* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1997). Marney speaks of the priestly function as having the "nerve to submit" to one another's care and leadership.

to try and fix each minuscule or cosmic problem that comes, but to stand in the gap with each other, creatively, lovingly, patiently, and hopefully, deeply aware of our own vulnerabilities. Only in that space does genuine healing become possible.

In fact, learning to live with our internal gaps is the most persistent need and problem we face. If we can find the courage to live faithfully there, then trust will emerge, maturity will grow, and creativity will bloom. Paul says to grow in trust means a move to “put an end to childish ways” (13:11 NRSV). Even as children, we found ourselves in the gap between the actual and the possible. Depending on parenting, the social world in which we lived, and other predispositions of mind and body, we may have leaned toward demanding insistence for new things. Or we may have cowered in fear and shame, never asking for much. As mature believers, we are called beyond demanding more or shrinking in fear.

A wise minister said to me recently: the real miracle of ministry (and we could add, life) is that we might be truly known and still loved.⁶ Such a mature yet clear and simple vision of the good life is only possible after a long sojourn in the gap. Ministries of speaking the truth, healing the troubled, caring for the sick, and leading the faithful, which are among the most needed in Christian communities, do not appear out of thin air, but rather in the lives of those who are willing to stick with the long faithfulness of relationship.⁷ In relationships between parents and children, spouses and partners, pastors and parishioners, it is easy to lose sight of the potential and possibility that exist in the gaps between us. For it is there where we are most vulnerable, most defensive, and often relentlessly reminded of the actual. Yet these relationships are also the ones where we learn over time the enduring truth of being fully known and still loved. They are the places where we come face to face with divine love itself. “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (13:13 NRSV).

At times you may find yourself between a rock and dark place, as I was in the cavern. And you may feel caught in a gap where you don’t have any power. What you do have is the miracle that you are fully known and still loved. And this very love comes from God, who in Christ holds the power and possibility of real healing and wholeness. This same God gives the gift of healing community and meets you face to face in all the tragic gaps of life. ⊕

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⁶Thanks to Rick Foss, colleague at Luther Seminary and director of contextual learning, for this insight.

⁷Rowan Williams speaks of the “body’s grace” that comes in many forms and can be known especially through long-standing relationships of faithfulness that teach maturity. See Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” in Eugene F. Rogers Jr., *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002) 309–321.