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Not I, but Christ—
A Disciple's Call

I have been crucified with Christ;
and it is no longer I who live,
but Christ who lives in me.

—Galatians 2:19–20

This is my first written reflection on the Christian life, dating from 1999–2000. The occasion was an invitation from the pastors of my congregation, who asked members to share their experiences relating to people on the margins. I took this as an opportunity to reflect on a series of such relationships, and one in particular, that had forced me to think about what it means to be a Christian—that, indeed, had confronted me with the question of whether I would commit myself to following Jesus. The first of these relationships, recounted below, took place during the spring of 1997 in Cambridge, England, where I spent a term researching and writing my dissertation for my doctoral studies at the University of Notre Dame. It is that encounter that set my heart and mind in motion.

The other visitors would come after my return to South Bend, Indiana, where over a period of a year, 1998–1999, God sent several men in succession to my front door (literally!). Each one presented his story of trouble (which I did not know whether to believe) and returned several times with requests for

help. As each kept appearing, the convicting words of the late Keith Green, from his song "Asleep in the Light," kept coming to mind:

> He brings people to your door / and you turn them away / as you smile and say, / "God bless you, be at peace" / and all heaven just weeps / Jesus came to your door / you've left him out on the street.[1]

Each time, then, I would greet my visitor, invite him in, and listen to his request. Responding to these requests, which usually came at night (and some of which I did refuse), took me to places and placed me in situations I had never been in before. Later I would wrestle with God in prayer: What do you want from me? At last I concluded: God is asking me to do what I had hesitated to do in Cambridge—to sacrifice everything. These situations were presenting me with a test of faith: Do I trust God enough to give away my money? To risk my safety to help another? To become entangled with a stranger's life?

During that year I often felt overwhelmed by the demands of these situations. I even found myself pleading with God that I had reached the limits of my patience and endurance and that he should "remove the cup" from me. God answered my prayer, not by removing the cup but by assuring me that "my grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor 12:9). And so, three times during that year, I gave away all the money I had, leaving myself only enough to pay rent and buy food for that month. I did so, not because I thought my generosity would save those men (only God knew what they really needed), but rather because I realized that doing so, as an act of trust in God, was necessary for me to "work out [my] own salvation with fear and trembling" in response to the work of God's grace in me (Phil 2:12–13).

It was these tokens of sacrifice that opened my heart to desire that I make my whole life an offering to God. After all, as Keith Green put it so effectively in his song "To Obey Is Better Than Sacrifice," God does not need my money, he wants my life! And it was God's grace in sustaining me by the Holy Spirit through the emotional and financial challenges of that year that enabled me to trust God so that I might make the crucial decisions, both personal and professional, that diverted my life down a different path.

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1. Keith Green, "Asleep in the Light" (1978).

What Is My Duty?

> "I confess to Almighty God,
> and to you, my brothers and sisters,
> that I have sinned through my own fault
> in my thoughts and in my words,
> by what I have done and what I have failed to do . . ."[2]

Think for a moment about the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Do the priest and the Levite, who both "passed by on the other side of the road" (Luke 10:31–32), actually sin in what they fail to do, by not helping the man who "fell into the hands of robbers"? Jesus clearly implies that they do sin—each neglects his neighbor and thus fails to fulfill the law of love.

Which raises the question: Which of the actions that I don't do are sins, failures to do what is required of me? Where is the line between duty and choice? The all-too-human way to draw this line begins with the ego-self—the *I*. And this *I* tends to draw the line according to self-interest.

That is precisely how the lawyer in the parable wants to define his duty under the law. Jesus tells the parable, you will remember, in reply to a lawyer who has asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks him to interpret the Torah on this question; and the lawyer recites what Jesus elsewhere acknowledges to be the two chief covenant commandments that summarize the law and the prophets—love God, love your neighbor (Luke 10:25–27; cf. Mark 12:28–34; Matt 22:34–40). Jesus replies approvingly, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live" (Luke 10:28). But the lawyer, "wanting to justify himself," asks Jesus: "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). The lawyer here seeks to qualify what is required of him, to limit his duty by circumscribing the category of persons ("neighbor") whom the Torah commands him to love. He wants a rational calculation to determine in advance how far the covenant obligation to "love your neighbor as yourself" extends. Implicitly, the pivot-point of the lawyer's question is not the neighbor but *I*.

Christian discipleship, however, begins with *not I*: Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:34–35). If I am to follow Jesus, *I* must first in some sense *die*; in

2. Prayer of confession from the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church.

losing my self—by death of the rational, autonomous, self-interested ego—I will truly live. For, Paul says, by taking up my cross, following Jesus and being crucified with him, Christ will live in me: "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal 2:19–20 KJV). But then, if it is not *I* who draws the line between duty and choice, what then is required of me? And who decides?

The Disciple's Call: Be Attentive

The prophet of the Lord instructs us: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6:8). In order to act with justice, mercy, and humility on behalf of those who are poor, oppressed, or outcast, I must already be aware of injustice, deprivation, and exclusion where it exists. And I will not become aware of injustice unless I make myself aware of those who suffer injustice, deprivation, or exclusion—that is, I must refocus attention, away from the self-interested *I* to the margins, to persons who have been overlooked. To fulfill what is required of me, to obey my Lord's call to discipleship, I must begin by *being attentive*—attentive to the word of the Lord, attentive to the cry of the poor. Thus, the first sin of omission—often hidden beneath the justifications and rationalizations that pave the road for sins of commission—is the failure to pay attention. My first responsibility is *to hear, to look, to take notice*. In this way, I might imitate the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, faithful to his word and his people, attends to the plight of the poor and oppressed:

> After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God *heard* their groaning, and God *remembered* his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God *looked* upon the Israelites, and God *took notice* of them. (Exod 2:23–25)

This call to be attentive first caught my attention some years ago while reading Albert Camus' collection of stories, *Exile and the Kingdom*. The following poem then came to me:

> Who are these silent ones that rage without sound?
> Has helplessness and despair numbed their tongues?
> Or has the assiduous march of life drummed out of them the will to speak?

> Who will listen to their cry in the restless night?
> For who could hear let alone understand the desperately quieted
> voice of the dispossessed?
> But their silence is our sentence,
> and their future is our fate.
> If we attend not to their unsung song,
> if we heed not their inaudible warning,
> if we do not listen to the silence of the voiceless,
> from our hands will drip their blood
> and upon our heads will fall their avenging.
>
> In our shadow rests our responsibility,
> at our margins lies our meaning.
> What is needed to avert our attention?

The call to be attentive finds keen expression in the work and writing of two women who gave their lives to others in suffering. Simone Weil emphasized that true, empathic love of neighbor essentially requires being consciously attentive to the suffering other as another like oneself:

> The love of our neighbor in all its fullness . . . is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen of the social category labeled "unfortunate," but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark of affliction.[3]

And Mother Theresa taught us that we must not only succor the suffering, but first and foremost we must respond to the need for dignity, respect, and welcome of those who suffer by recognizing them as "Christ in distressing disguise."

Attending to the Margins

Many injustices require our attention in this world. One of the difficulties that stand in the way of addressing the persistent problem of homelessness in our society is that homeless persons themselves are often not only homeless, but also voiceless, nameless, and faceless to those of us in privileged positions who possess the power to pass them by without taking notice. And so they will remain unnoticed on the margins of our lives until we, in servant spirit, deliberately avert attention from ourselves, regard their divinely-imaged humanity with the eyes of a conscience convicted—and,

3. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 115.

rather than speaking about or even for them, let their own voices resound with resolute clarity in our ears and hearts.

In order to be attentive to suffering others, such as those who are homeless, we must encounter them in their own world; and this requires that we be displaced from those comfortable spaces in which we are at home. Where we feel at home, the familiarity of the space frees us from having to take notice of our surroundings in order to orient our activity; it is precisely our ability to *not* attend to distraction that frees us to function purposefully and efficiently. Along the avenues and pavements of our cities, homeless persons can become distractions that familiarity enables us to ignore such that they pass through our view unnoticed. It is thus when we are in some way displaced from our familiar space into an alien place that we begin to pay attention, that we must of necessity take notice.

The very lives of Simone Weil and Mother Theresa teach us this lesson by example. Weil displaced herself from houses of comfort and halls of privilege to the factories of the laborers and fields of the peasants. Mother Theresa displaced herself from the safety of the cloister in Albania to the suffering of the streets in Calcutta. My own all-too-human tendency, after coming into contact with a suffering person, is to want to wash off the suffering, to purify myself of suffering by separating from the sufferer, to distance myself from him so as to convince myself that his suffering is not mine—and, hence, that I am not responsible for him.

Henri Nouwen taught us by his life that, once we learn to recognize Christ in the suffering presence of the other, a truly compassionate response in the face of the other leads one to dwell in the midst of the other's suffering:

> Here we see what compassion means. It is not a bending toward the underprivileged from a privileged position . . . On the contrary, compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there.[4]

Dwelling amidst the suffering of others requires that we resolutely plant ourselves in the soil where suffering grows, outside the walls of pretended purity that hide suffering others from our view and that hide us from our responsibility—we must get dirty. Thomas Merton, while discerning his own vocation before entering Gethsemani Abbey, was convicted of the potential even for the religiously devoted to retreat behind the safety of

4. Nouwen et al., *Compassion*, 27.

monastery walls and remain ignorant of suffering and one's responsibility for it.

> Instead of seeing Christ suffering in His members, and instead of going to help Him, Who said: "Whatsoever you did to the least of these my brethren, you did it to Me," we preferred our own comfort: we averted our eyes from such a spectacle, because it made us feel uneasy: the thought of so much dirt nauseated us—and we never stopped to think that we, perhaps, might be partly responsible for it.[5]

A Disciple's Margin Call

My own displacement from the familiar occurred in the spring of 1997, when I studied for a semester at the University of Cambridge in England. Nearly every day, on my usual way home from the university, I encountered a homeless man, who sat with two dogs in a storefront, almost always the same one, asking passersby for spare change. Until then, my only real encounter with homeless persons had been as a volunteer at the South Bend Center for the Homeless. At the Center, my interaction with homeless persons was neatly controlled by the institutional structure, and my responsibility to the guests was not only narrowly circumscribed by my role as a children's tutor, but was always left behind when I left the building. Moreover, the more familiar I became with the geography of the center, the freer I felt to ignore those guests who did not concern me. How I should respond to this man now before me on the edge of the pavement, outside the security and predictability of the walls at the Center, I didn't know.

Though he was a friendly and gentle man, always thanking me kindly for whatever spare change I gave him and even thanking me when I said I had nothing to give, this was an uncontrolled situation. Instinctively, I sought to control it by keeping the relationship on my own terms and thereby keeping him on the periphery of my concern, so as to limit my sense of responsibility toward him. I didn't have courage enough to stop and ask him, "What are you going through?"—much less to listen to him speak in his own voice. I did not invite him into my home, much less attempt to dwell in the midst of his suffering. I did not even ask him his name, nor as much as prayed for him. The possibility of such familiarity and intimacy—the

5. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 341.

thought of close contact with his uncleanness—frightened me. The more I knew of his situation, the more vulnerable to the world of his suffering I might become and the more responsible for his situation I might feel.

I noticed the suffering—or, rather, I noticed my own discomfort in the face of his suffering—but I failed to recognize and respond to the human dignity of the sufferer himself. Each morning and after meeting him each evening, I passed by a church displaying a sign, upon which was written:

> Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt 11:28–30)

Though I read and pondered the meaning of this message for myself, not once did I recognize in these words the face of the suffering man on the edge of the pavement—and so, too, did I fail to recognize in him the incarnate face of the very One whose words these are.

Instead, I preoccupied myself with the philosophical-moral question, What do I owe him? How much money should I give him each time I pass by? Only the loose change in my pocket? This posed a dilemma. In British currency, there is a gold £1 coin, rather than a paper note, in addition to silver coins of lesser value. To give him all the change in my pocket, then, would sometimes be to give away a few pounds (and, with the exchange rate, several dollars), not just a few pence. That seemed too much to require. So, each day as I anticipated passing his usual place on the edge of the pavement, I would hurriedly thrust my hand into my pocket to feel what coins I had and to sort them by touch. I did this to save myself the embarrassment of pulling out a handful of change in front of him and having him see me sort out the silver for him and keep back the gold for myself. A few times, though, not paying attention to where I was, I found myself standing before him fumbling nervously with my change; and if on these occasions I gave him gold as well as silver, it was only because I feared his resentment. Conscious of my sin, I rationalized with myself to appease my conscience: If I owed him all the change in my pocket, then what about the £5, £10, or £20-pound note in my wallet? And if I owed him all that was in my wallet, what about the £250 in my checking account? Would I owe him all that, too? Didn't reason (my self-interested *I* said) demand a limit somewhere? So, I settled for the minimum, and continued to give him only the silver coins from my pocket.

I sought to fulfill my responsibility, but I missed the point of the prophet's teaching—mercy and humility are to qualify justice. I sought to do justice, but conceived of it as only a monetary exchange between interested parties, a transaction to be defined and calculated by the ideal rational agent. And so, like the Pharisees and scribes, I "neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matt 23:23). I was straining gnats only to swallow camels! I had presumed that I could circumscribe the sphere of my responsibility toward him as I saw fit, that I could draw a line between myself and him and say, "This far will I go and no further, and that is far enough." I presumed that I could calculate for myself how much I owed him, that I could fix in advance the cost of discipleship. But, again, had I not missed the point? Before the call to discipleship costs me a dollar, it first requires me to *give attention*: the other in whose suffering presence I stand summons me to compassion and mercy. In all my self-interested calculating, rationalizing, and justifying, *I* had eclipsed *him* from view—and therefore Christ, too.

Let's return to the parable of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer's self-justifying definition of the covenant via legal casuistry is embodied in the parable by the priest and the Levite, who both "passed by on the other side" of the road (Luke 10:31–32). "But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him . . ." (Luke 10:33–34). What differentiates the Samaritan from the priest and the Levite? Both the priest and Levite also "saw him." The crucial difference between the Samaritan's show of mercy and the priest's and Levite's shows of indifference occurs before this. While the priest was merely "going down that road," and the Levite only "came to the place," the Samaritan "came near him" (Luke 10:31–33). This "coming near *him*"—in contrast with just "going down *the road*" or "coming to *the place*"—is the crucial difference. We could say that, while all three passersby *saw* the man, only the Samaritan *took notice* of him. Or, we might say that while the priest and the Levite bypass only a specific instance of the general category "unfortunate" (which can be regarded with indifference), the Samaritan encounters *this* man like himself in *his* suffering.

The Samaritan's steps are redirected toward the man ("he went to him") only because his *attention* had already been redirected—from his travel plans and future purposes to this man, here, now. What drew the Samaritan *near him*, toward this man lying beaten beside the road? The man's cry for mercy, we may imagine. We could even imagine that the Samaritan's

merciful response imitates God's merciful response to the Israelites' cry for help out of slavery and oppression: He *heard* his groaning by the side of the road, *remembered* the covenant ("love your neighbor as yourself"), *looked* upon the man, and *took notice* of him. As God "took notice" of the Israelites in their suffering and then "came down to deliver them" (Exod 3:7–8), the Samaritan inclined his ear, opened his heart, and then "came near" to deliver this man from his suffering at the edge of the road.

Before dispensing his material provisions and pledging his financial means to assist the man (Luke 10:34–35), the Samaritan committed first his *attention* and then his whole self to the man in his suffering—he surrendered his *I* to the other's plea for compassion and mercy. The Samaritan's self-displacement to the "other side" of the road and into the world of that one man's suffering—this movement of compassion and mercy in the suffering presence of the other, this *giving attention* to the other prior to ever asking "Is he my neighbor?" or "How much do I owe him?"—fulfills the life-promising covenant (Luke 10:25–28, 37). Jesus' call to discipleship, disclosed by the suffering presence of the other, is thus beyond—indeed, before—any and all calculation of enlightened self-interest by the ideal rational agent.

Now back to the edge of the pavement in Cambridge: Though a man's body burdened by hunger be bowed over, though his eyes filled with the shame of homelessness be cast down, though his voice drowned by the despair of powerlessness be quieted, his outstretched arm and upturned, opened hand reveals the destitution of his situation and summons a compassionate, merciful response. The opened hand of the hungry stranger is the hand of Jesus, inviting me to fellowship at God's banquet table of grace. Before me, then, manifest in the flesh, was Christ in "distressing disguise" (Matt 25:31–46). Here, in the embodied, suffering presence of this one man created in God's holy image was my call to discipleship. The only way to elude my responsibility would have been to avert my eyes and ears, close my heart, and cross to the far side of the pavement. But I could indifferently sidestep him and my responsibility no more than he could simply get up and walk away from his homelessness.

Discipleship begins with Christ, not *I*—"not I, but Christ." In the suffering presence of the other, I am faced with the Christ who summons me to responsibility: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God—and first, to be attentive, listen, remember, look, take notice.

A few years later I was able to draw a lesson from my encounters with the man on the edge of the pavement in Cambridge. While serving as a church mission worker in South Bend, Indiana, I took an assignment at the Advocacy Center. Operated and supported by the churches of the county, this faith-based ministry served people in crisis situations by dispensing both material and financial assistance as well as advocating on their behalf with various public service agencies. We dispensed everything from toiletries to socks to school supplies to bus tokens to gas vouchers to food vouchers to utility payments to rental deposits to agency referrals to personal advice. A place of last resort, we served thousands of clients each year. My primary responsibility was to do intake interviews with the clients and then discern with the director how best to offer assistance, referral, or advocacy. In doing so, we sought to serve our clients' individual needs and not box them into various social categories of "unfortunates." As I served the clients and observed my fellow volunteers during those three years, I came to see that the most important thing we did, what characterized us as a Christian ministry rather than a mere social agency, was serving hot coffee and listening to people tell their stories—satisfying the very human need for welcome, respect, and dignity. I thus realized that the proper question with which to begin the intake interview was not "What do you need?" or "How may we help you?" but rather "What is your situation? What are you going through?"