

Dr. Mary Fraser
Iowa Annual Conference
Office of Pastoral Care and Counseling
Healthy Congregations Workshop – October 13, 2009

When we speak of “perfect love,” as we often do in the life of Christianity, and in particular, in the life of United Methodism, we sometimes mistake this way of being in the world for a goal to which we strive. Certainly, John Wesley described us as “moving on to perfection,” capturing both the fluid nature of our lives as well as the direction we pursue. Most of us would readily agree that we are not perfect, that we often love imperfectly and that we hope to do better. However, “perfect love” as understood through the activity of Christ is not a goal but a way of being alive. We engage in practices to hasten the amount of time we spend in awareness of perfect love, but it is an always available existential place where we actively rest: that is we rest in the arms of God which makes available to us extraordinary energy for creativity and life. When Wesley spoke of moving on to perfection, I believe he raised the question of deepening our capacity to hold, breathe and widen the circle of awareness of God’s perfect love all the time.

The best way to illustrate this is first to think of someone you deeply and completely love. For me, I would think of my children. I do not have to strive to love my children, I simply do love them. I do not have to imagine myself defending them or working toward their good; I simply and completely give myself to these endeavors. What we often call instinct in motherhood is the action of perfect love and this kind of love is found far and wide within the human and animal kingdom. It is a replica of how God loves us. The intention toward us is for goodness, for life and for well being.

The second illustration of how perfect love is a way of being alive is to imagine in your mind an injury you have sustained. Then imagine where in your body you hold the energy or memory of that injury. If you can, put your hand there: perhaps on your heart, your forehead, your stomach or your shoulder. Massage that area a little, and as you do that, call to mind someone from whom you have received great love. Breathe in deeply that sense of being loved. Try to imagine breathing it into the place where you have felt injured. My guess is that as you do that you will experience three things: an emotion, a sensation in your body and a thought concerning the emotion and the sensation. In this exercise you become perfectly present to your body and to the experience of emotion and sensation in your body. If you are imagining someone who truly does love you, you will experience a warmth and feeling of assurance that cannot be compromised. The experience of healing is supported by the recalling of great love. That is also the nature of perfect love – its healing efficacy is always available.

One of the most difficult problems of staying healthy in body, mind and spirit is that we forget that we are held in perfect love or that we are agents of perfect love. All of us have this amnesia – sometimes I think the nature of our fall from grace as articulated in Genesis and in Christian theology is really a forgetfulness rather than a fallen-ness, a way of putting out of our mind the workings of our bodies, the nature of our hearts and the way the Spirit seeks to commune with us through other people and the world around us. Someone once said loneliness itself is a great lie that we tell ourselves when what we are feeling is either the motivation to connect with others around us or the urge to find our resting place in

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God in the midst of busy and hectic lives or in the midst of broken and grief-filled minds. The true nature of reality is that we are all connected all the time; the question at hand is not of connection but rather what kind of connection and what are the methods and boundaries that we need in order to stay healthy and to have healthy relationships with God, ourselves and each other?

A few years ago, I wrote an article called “Tending and Befriending,” that was published both in the quarterly newsletter for the Women’s Division and in our then magazine, **Grace Upon Grace**. In that essay I spoke of a man I knew once who had :

“suffered profound nerve damage through some neurological disorder. This man had lost sensation in most of his body. He simply could not feel hot or cold, pain or pleasure. He only had a sense of pressure when various places were touched. He told me that in order to handle this new way of being in the world, he had to imagine what it was to feel things. He had to try to remember what it was to know sensation. What we modern people try to do is avoid feeling in our emotional bodies. We have come to believe that having a disorder like this man in emotional and spiritual forms would be a good thing. In this, we have forgotten the meaning of the incarnation, the life that is lived here on the planet in a body. We are modern day docetists, people who believed that the body is simply an illusion and that ongoing spiritual development finally frees people of their bodies. Rather, with incarnational theology, the body is the vessel by which we experientially learn of truth. The truth of joy, love, pain, peace, suffering, and compassion are all known through physical bodily experiences. Even the brain itself is a physical entity organizing our experience for us in this life. Feeling and identifying powerful streams of experience in our own bodies is a part of our tending to ourselves and our spiritual journey. Attention to our breath, allowing it to create the loving naming we need, widens our soul, strengthens our inner fiber and moves us forward in encompassing experiences of confidence and wellness.

So much of our self care these days is really self shaming or scolding or even hatred. We whip ourselves for overeating, hate ourselves for being unhappy with our lives, or shame ourselves into rigorous but mean-spirited hours of exercise, devotional time or dieting. We make lists of all the ways we need to improve. To tend and befriend ourselves requires a whole different attitude. We must meet ourselves as though we were caring for a cherished and precious person...because we are. We are God’s beloved. Our disciplines, in order to be life giving, need to move from genuine love and appreciation for all the things that are amazing about us. From that kernel of deep affirming power, is the power to transform the world – first in your own life and slowly extending to the lives around you. It is such a needed way of being. It is like a memory that must be recovered: you are loved!!!! We are all loved!!!! “**Tending and Befriending**, Dr. Mary L. Fraser, Women’s Division, 2004

The problem of our Western world, and thus Western forms of Christianity, is that we have excused ourselves from a holistic presence to our bodies, emotions, psychology and spirit life. We are like sleepwalkers in the world, setting aside the radical nature of the

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Incarnation that calls us to be present to all the sensations of our bodies, to all the ways our emotions work within us and to the many facets of our intellect. Our task in considering what it means to be healthy and to facilitate healthy relationships in our congregations is really to wake to what is real and true around and in us. Once we are awake, we can manage and care for the directions of our physical, psychological and spiritual life. If we are asleep or have cut off from ourselves the truth of what we need, how we feel or where we wish to go relationally, then we will act out with ourselves and others. It is not something we do because we are bad; rather that is the consequence of not dealing with ourselves as perfectly loved people who are complex and dramatic. We both wake and deal with ourselves or we walk as sleepwalkers across the stage of our lives, committing the heresy of docetism, separating off from ourselves genuine feelings and the truth that we live in real bodies with real needs. Once we are awakened, and thus in close communion with our own bodily selves, then we are much better equipped in dealing with the embodied lives of other people. We embark on the truly incarnational life promised in our Baptism.

Two Scripture references help us in particular with regard to these matters. The first comes from Romans, where the Apostle Paul encourages us to be “transformed by the renewal of your minds.” In other words, the intelligent use of our mind is essential as a resource for healing ourselves. We must be thoughtful, aware and conscious in order to maximize healthy relationships. Transformation into being aware of perfect love within and around us asks that we think about what we are doing, how we are living, where we are putting our affection and our aggression. Transformation in the Incarnational life is an every day event, progressive but constant and it asks us to be intelligent about our lives. We can pose questions to ourselves such as, “how would I like to be loved?” and “what feels good to me?” when thinking about how another might like to be loved. We can wonder, “if I were in that person’s shoes, what is it that would be the very best thing for me?” We can bring to our relationship with ourselves and with others a true awakened consciousness that eventually becomes internalized and held, automatic and genuine. It is then that our character is melded with the gracious, loving character of Jesus.

The second Scripture I would like to notice comes from I Corinthians, one you are well familiar with:

1 Cor. 6:19-20 "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; 20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body," (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Here is the notion that we are not our own. It is my reading of this passage for the present time that what is noteworthy is the relational dynamic that the Apostle is demanding. Your body is not just yours to do with as you wish. You are already, as you live in Christ, representative of a holy relationship. Where we do not often like to go, but I think we can speak of boldly now that we are in the “Fit Challenge,” is that there are many ways to dishonor our bodies and we do them all the time: we eat in ways that dishonor ourselves and the hungry people on the earth; we waste resources in ways that damage our

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environment and the other creatures who share the planet with us; and we disregard the emotional, spiritual and psychological boundaries of ourselves and others.

So, as we ponder how to handle this shadowy truth about ourselves, we gather to ourselves the great Protestant affirmation, that even as we do these things, we believe we are saved by grace through faith, and that as we are being saved, we grow in our consciousness, our ability to be aware of what is right action and what is indiscretion, and our determined efforts to act into the world in perfect love. “What does Love require of me,” is our first question precisely because now we belong in body and mind to the Holy Spirit, and thus we have become a temple in the world, a sanctuary for the heart of God and the seeking souls on the journey with us. If we are awakened, we see that others stand to be a temple for us too; that others offer their sanctuary so, we, too, can rest and be healed, not just through our own best efforts, but through the mercy and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ who is living in the hearts and minds of people sent to us and who we receive.

WHAT DOES LIVING IN THE FLESH OR LIVING IN THE SPIRIT MEAN?

The fundamental meaning of covenant is a special contract that links one person to another, or, perhaps in today’s world we can speak of having a relationship with the earth and its creatures that is like a covenantal contract. The special nature of the contract that binds one to the other is the belief that the relationship is a sacred trust, a bond that involves the spiritual life and the essential core of each self. When a covenant is formed, the nature of the contract is not merely legal but moral and bears the ethic of love within it. Behavior stems from the first consideration of what is the correct action according to love, not just according to a legal limit or arbitrary marker established by societal norms. The nature of love is discovered by Christians through the activity of Jesus in the world and the measures of grace, mercy, justice and healing. This discovery of love is what living in the Spirit means.

Harold Kushner speaks of the formation of the Ten Commandments in his recent book, ***Overcoming Life’s Disappointments***. Rabbi Kushner suggests that when Moses went up Mount Sinai God’s intention was to hand down a perfect law that would allow human access to perfect love. But when the tablets broke, it signaled the way the heart is broken in its inability to follow perfect law. However, in offering the Ten Commandments on broken stone, the Bible is also telling us that our hearts are not made of stone and neither is God’s. In fact, our brokenness always points in some way to God’s intention for us to have and find wholeness. For our consideration of what it means to be a healthy person and to develop healthy congregations we want to emphasize an awareness of the broken and whole tension living in us. We must never be so arrogant to assume that we are incapable of actions that hurt or betray other people. Yet, we must also be so confident of God’s intention for us that we strive to live in ways that maximize our awareness of perfect love and allows others to experience that as well.

The basic appropriate relationship with other people is: I/Thou. The basic covenantal relationship for Christians is God in Christ to Human as Thou. So, each person we meet

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and each person who is before us is really to us a Thou, never simply a living creature or an object. And in the existential covenant we are always connected to God. Therefore all of our actions are in some way relational to the divine covenant. Once again, in our amnesia, we forget this. Many of the regrettable actions we take toward ourselves or others emerge from this forgetfulness of our deep and unalterable connectivity to the divine source. Perhaps the nature of all true sin and in its excess all evil is the repudiation of the covenant between a self and its source in the Divine. Thus, when we act in inappropriate ways, we are always taking action against God, and this is also the root of much abiding suffering.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF SEEING OTHERS AS WHOLE OR DIVIDED

Some psychologies suggest that a basic defense mechanism in the human mind is the ability to divide something that is whole into pieces. Of course, doing so allows a kind of temporary psychological or emotional competency, since the fullness of another is now in smaller bits. One does not have to deal with complex feelings, behaviors or attitudes but separates off what feels undesirable or overwhelming or unmanageable, and focuses on a small piece of another person's personality, issue, problem or way of being in the world. Many descriptions of such psychological splitting occur in popular culture: we use the term "black and white thinking" to designate such a division. We say, "he is a fundamentalist or she is a liberal leftist" also as ways of boxing in people so we feel we can understand or manage their energy. Often we do this splitting in ourselves. Perhaps we do not like that fact that we feel anger and so we split off our overt feelings and they seem to disappear. Until another person, often a loved one or someone who is astute to us, notices that we have become, "passive aggressive," that is we have hidden our anger in behavior that could be labeled something else besides anger but the intent is shining through. Or perhaps we do not like our feelings of being sexual or sensual, and so we split that off and pretend that we are somehow not imbued with human sexuality. Often, this then becomes manifest when we overindulge in some other area, or we become professional care providers (but never care receivers) or there is acting out in sexual ways that are inappropriate. Most matters of sexual misconduct, no matter how flagrant they appear, are really issues of the denial of true and honest sexuality. Misconduct issues are ways the human person talks about brokenness in that area. It is evidence of deep splitting occurring within a person and usually within two people, and that is the nature of its tragedy.

We in the church have approached this area of splitting, and in particular, the area of sexual misconduct in punitive ways. And certainly accountability is of the utmost importance in the area of ministry where people are presenting themselves in vulnerable positions all the time. Where the church has sometimes failed however, is in educating and working to heal its clergy and its laity from the unconscious activities of psychological and emotional splitting that are a part of our human condition. It is not that we can legislate splitting devices out of the human psychology. The only thing we can do is to educate people on what is happening to them, what can happen, and to create environments that develop better resourcing of whole object relationships – that is a term that means we increasingly see and relate with people as complex and whole persons, rather than in small manageable pieces. We rarely get a great handle on misconduct and thus brokenness in covenant because we do not

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elucidate the mental processes that are articulating stunted or stymied ways of being in the world. To the extent that we deny this form of brokenness, we allow the emotional and psychological neediness of the split off parts of the psyche to run rampant much as a child throwing a temper tantrum is left to run havoc without anyone setting a limit. It is never helpful, and never only the fault of the child. It is the way the environment has dealt incorrectly with need.

When we look at the psychology of human beings from this vantage, we can notice that misconduct in any form is a way of defending vulnerable parts of the inner self from feelings of being out of control, invaded, powerless or devalued. In this regard it is not just sexual acting out that constitutes misconduct. Indeed, celibacy can be a form of misconduct if it is being used as a method of denying sexuality. And there are the other forms of misconduct: using an imbalance of power in a relationship to influence a decision without free consent or imposing attitudes or opinions on others without their agreement. These are all ways of splitting off the fullness of human being into compartments to be managed. They are ways of hiding the inner softness and thus weakness within by directing energy outward. Whether demonizing someone, seducing someone or forcing someone to an agreement, when one person insists on making another person small and for gratification of the need to split, the action is a way of breaking covenant. Sometimes we call it manipulation.

We heal these behaviors in two principle ways: first we need to become aware of what is happening whether to ourselves or to another person. We regain self control and competency in true ways when we understand the process. Secondly, in relationship with one another we can call attention to our behaviors in a gentle but clear manner, naming with one another the ways we are splitting off and making small. There are two major forms of splitting in the human psyche: projection and projective identification. Projection is a pretty simple concept to understand but a more difficult concept to handle in behaviors. Projection is simply placing inside another person traits, feelings and behaviors that really belong to oneself. Idealizing people is a form of projection. In some ways, all love and affection begins with forms of projection or we would not really be interested in one another. But, where projection becomes honest love is when it matures into both a true appreciation for the real strengths and greatness of another as well as oneself. There becomes a space between two people that is a place of meeting rather than emotional invading. When projection is so intense that such a place of rest and openness is denied, then we use terms like enmeshment, entanglement, and obsession.

The second method of splitting that is quite common is called projective identification. This is a more complex way of relating but happens often in the life of the faith community. Projective identification is a way of getting another person to feel how you feel and then relating to that as though it were originating from the other. For instance, let's say you are angry but unable to express that. So, you do something to make someone else angry. Now you are able to see your anger in another and not have to feel the intensity yourself. You have split off your anger and deposited in another person, who, usually because of their relationship to you either agrees unconsciously to hold it for you or never saw it coming or gets confused as to what is his or her anger in the first place. We call this provocative

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behavior. The brokenness is the fundamental lack of honesty in the self; the inability to deal with difficult emotion. For the people who receive the projections, their lack of boundary is usually described as co-dependent. They are such extreme care providers that they will even agree to carry another person's feelings. We often see this device in congregational life. People get others to "fight their battles," or people tell rumors about others in order to engender anger or distress usually because the person telling the rumor cannot deal with his or her distress in appropriate ways.

Both projection and projective identification can lead to misconduct because they are ways one person is relating not a true give and take. The mistake is that what one believes about another is really a mirror of oneself. Now, here is one complicating feature: often times two or more people are projecting or using projective identification at the same time. What a mess! How do we ever get such a situation sorted out? The answer lies in the self scrutiny asked of each person in coming to terms with his or her life in the covenant with God, self and other. One of the things we have not understood correctly in the life of Christian discipleship is that the self is exceedingly important. It is neither selfish nor narcissistic to be involved with oneself in honest inventory and self renewal. Rather, that is the way of getting and staying clear in the tangle of projections and projective identification in the world in which we live. And if each person who is a ministerial professional could practice getting clear with his or herself, the healing potential for the greater community would be greatly increased.

The final way of splitting out the self I would like to deal with is also a way of gaining wholeness when used appropriately. This is called transference and counter transference. These basically describe imbuing another person with ways of relating that emerge not from the immediate relationship but from other significant relationships. The person in the role of parishioner would utilize transference and the pastor would be experiencing counter transference. If there is no clear understanding of what is going on, these people can easily ascribe all kinds of behaviors and feelings to others that stir up ways of relating that really are describing other significant relationships. When these transferences and counter transferences are managed properly, new forms of relating can emerge in creative and healing ways. But without insight they often become replicas of relationships that had problems embedded in them or which were unfinished or which are remnants of parental relationships.

Any of these ways of splitting can lead to opportunities for healing for people, and thus fabulous ministry. If the ministerial professional becomes aware of these devices in people, worship, study, prayer, mission and even the sacraments can be offered in ways that create greater opportunities for wholeness and complexity. By the way, often the most complex way of relating appears the most simple. We see that in music for example. Imagine the fugue, Canon in D, which is a repeating series of the same notes, but in the repetition there is much depth and complexity until the whole of the piece is greater than the parts.

But any of these ways of splitting can lead to damaging relationships when the splitting is not identified for what it is, and people act out according to inner needs and drives that really

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have nothing to do with the other person. Sexual misconduct usually is such an acting out, and the force by which it takes a hold of a person usually indicates the greatness of the need. The victim of such acting out has also failed to defend properly parts of the self vulnerable to splitting inside or holding the projective identification of another. This does not make that person less a victim but it is important in the ministry to teach people how and why they may be vulnerable so they do not mistake splitting mechanisms for love, respect or covenant.

What then is it to be in a whole relationship with other people? In large part it is to examine the inner ways one splits off parts of the self into others and to retrieve and reclaim those pieces, to bring them back into loving relationship with the self. 1st John reminds us that what we shall be has not yet been revealed, but we know that when it is we shall be like Him for we shall understand even as we have been perfectly understood. The process of understanding and being understood must be viewed as a central theological endeavor and theme.

There is a form of therapy called Internal Family Systems. Internal Family Systems says that we all have parts of ourselves like pieces of self that come forward or retreat when they feel needed, strong, confident, weak, sacred, needy or vital. As we learn all the parts of ourselves we can integrate more fully the many facets of being human and enjoy ourselves fully for who we are without unconsciously projecting in ways that lead to misconduct, invasive methods, power abuse or manipulation. We also become owners of ourselves in ways that before were impossible. They manipulation of other people becomes less invasive, less destructive to ourselves and we are better defended from enmeshment and manipulation. Finally, when we have acted in ways that have broken covenant we can learn from those mistakes rather than repeat an endless cycle. In all cases, as we live fully into the world, we can understand. And by those who journey with us and who do their own work as well, we can be understood. In this way we arrive at Namaste: the God in me greets the God in thee.

A. The Practices of Living in Covenantal Relationship

- a. To Be Single: “An old Me and a new I” – to be the subject of one’s life
 - i. Ronald Rolheiser: the poverty of singlehood
 1. the boundary of the self as connected to all
 2. the integrity of singular intimacy with God
 - ii. To attend to others without intimate demand
 - iii. To care for the self without hesitation
 1. dating
 2. friendships
- b. To be Partnered: To be a We while remaining Me
 - i. Nearness as a category of Christian Householding
 - ii. To practice caring for another and oneself
 1. the struggles remind of boundary and need

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2. the joys remind of union and communion
3. the integrity of the triune nature of God/Self/Other
4. When things go wrong: divorce, death, losses, addictions

c. The Respecting of Self and Others

- i. To be a Ministerial Professional is to hold the boundary for others
 1. people practice with you as a way of learning how to care for themselves and other people
 2. people need you to be appropriate
- ii. To be a Ministerial Professional is to know where to go to care for yourself
- iii. To be a Ministerial Professional is to have enough contact with people outside your professional community that you have perspective
- iv. To be a Ministerial Professional is to learn to trust yourself well enough to know when you are strong and when you are weak and to seek appropriate support, accountability and strength

PRACTICES OF THE DISCIPLED LIFE