

CHAPTER SIX

CHOOSING TO EXPECT— EVEN WITHOUT SIGNS

Let us return to the question of faith and expecting in prayer. How can we expect that God will deliver what we ask when we have so many past experiences of His not delivering? Here we are at the center of the nature of faith. God promises, but He does not appear to deliver. Often people observe the effects of prayer selectively. When their prayer is for sunny weather and it is sunny, they remember it as an answer to prayer; but when it rains, they forget it. Or they feel God said no. But in the matter of a deeper loving and a deeper trusting God will *never* say no. His whole purpose in choosing to create us is precisely to share Himself with us. He is always wanting and able to increase our love and our faith. Why then doesn't He?

How do we know He doesn't? We make judgments about whether or not the grace has been given. We feel we have signs of the grace, and if they do not appear, we conclude that the grace has not been given. But what if these signs are not valid.

St. Francis de Sales says that the spiritual journey is much like sailing across the ocean. On the first morning you come up on deck, and you look around, and you see nothing but water in every direction. Are you going forward or backward? You do not know. The captain knows, and you trust the captain.⁵

What if there really are no signs of growth in the spiritual life,

signs by which I can accurately measure my growth. What if we are forced to rely on the Lord's word, and to trust in the promises He has made? But can't we measure a growth in love, for example? Once I would not even speak to Olga, and now, ever since the retreat, I have been speaking to her. My angry feelings are gone. Isn't that a sure sign? Not at all.

Love is a good example of the problem, since all growth in the spiritual life is in its essence a growth in love. But love is a most peculiar reality. It is not self-conscious. The lover's consciousness is elsewhere. Where there is love, there is a great sensitivity to the needs of others. There is no great focus on the self. Remember the man who leaped into the icy Potomac to save the drowning woman. When he came back, he was unaware of having done anything that heroic. That is the very nature of love. A love that is conscious of its own loving is only superficial. Love turns our eyes outward toward the needs of our fellows.

Jesus defined love in a parable—the Good Samaritan. Yet when the Samaritan arrived home that night and told his wife of his finding the man in the ditch, and she asked him, "What did you do?" I can hear him saying, "What *can* you do?" Unimpressed with his own behavior—that is love! It is a sign to others, but not to ourselves. Love fixes the lover's attention on the needs of others.

Let us take an oversimplified example. Brother John stops his many activities once each month and evaluates his spiritual health. This month he is aware of ten areas of need in his life, and he feels he is responding well to all but one of them. He expresses gratitude to God—it's a 90% grade, and he resolves to do better. He prays for a deeper love. And the Lord obliges him. He fills Brother John with a depth of love he has never had before. As a result John is much more sensitive to the needs around him. He now sees one hundred needs where before he saw only ten. He doubles his efforts and responds to eighteen of them, eighteen out of a hundred. But his overall mark falls to 18%. This can be shocking. Where before he had felt good

about his fulfillment of the love command, now he sees he is falling far short. So he begs the Lord for a vast increase in his loving-power. And the Lord obliges him. Through this gift of deeper loving, Brother John now sees one thousand needs. He is seeing how much he missed, how insensitive he was all along. His self-image is crumbling, even as his love is growing. That is the nature of love.

Von Balthasar talks of a state where at last we see true love with clarity, in Christ—and we realize that we do not have true love.⁶ The saints are not buoyed by their image of themselves as loving. "How sensitive I have become!" Quite the opposite. They have the courage to be honest, and they see themselves caught in an imbedded insensitivity.

Yet they are very joyful. How can that be? They trust the Captain. Into that sense of their own ingrained lovelessness comes the word of the Lord, His voice, assuring them of His love and total commitment to them, and His determination to spare no expense in saving them from their loveless ways.

On the one hand they have the data which indicate how deep is their unlove. On the other hand they have God's word assuring them, "I am at work within you as a seed in the ground: secretly, yes, but effectively. Fear not." It is that assurance which sustains them. God is wanting to assure each of us of that working of His within us. But such assurances can only be given to the honest; such exaltations are for the humble.

Jesus does not invite us to check on God's faithfulness, but to trust in it: to know that God delivers, no matter how things may appear; to choose to believe Him even without evidence. Any other believing would be no believing. Once I hear His promise, even in the very hearing of His promise, I am enabled to believe it true, to trust that it is being done. When we ask for a specific loving that we have not had, we tend to check to see if it comes. People will say, "The grace did finally come." They were watching for it. But Jesus tells us, "When you ask for something in prayer, know that you are receiving it!" Don't bother to check!

Know! That is the trust we are invited into, a trust that refuses to doubt the Father's promise, a knowing of God as the One who always delivers on His word.

Such trust based on a hearing of His word alone can only come from Him. In the gift of faith, God shares with us His inner awareness of His own trustworthiness. It is a breaking into our consciousness of His consciousness. It is one way of describing what Jesus lived and died for: to liberate us from the depressing illusion that God is not nearly so committed to us as the Gospel suggests. Bowed down by that illusion, we become slaves. Faith makes us His children. We waste so much energy trying to assess our spiritual health. We grasp at signs of growth from which we can draw some consolation about ourselves. To see ourselves growing is important for our general happiness. Because of a fear of losing this happiness we suppress any indications that we might not be growing. We very actively engage in a self-consoling. All the while the Lord has for us intense consolations flowing, not from an awareness of our growth, but from an awareness of His determination to give us Himself. That is the good news. It is all about Him, and His spectacular and unexpected choice to love us. To believe that is to be freed from sign-seeking.

God's promising, then, is what we are given, with no apparent delivery. On Monday of the Second Week of Advent we ask God to "... sustain us with your promise. . . ." It sounds like a rather thin sustenance, a promise. But how sustaining it is depends on the faith with which it is received.

What if I *knew* that God was trustworthy! I would then live in His promises. They would be carved on my heart. I would be recalling them constantly, instinctively. My whole day would be permeated with their aroma. They would be my distraction.

In a way the Eucharist is a symbol of the way God works within us. It *looks*, and *tastes*, and *is*. It *looks* like bread and wine. It is the flesh of Jesus, and his blood. And it has a sweet and joyful taste. When love comes to us, it is the power to forgive

someone, to let go of a "justified" resentment, to stop judging someone. But it doesn't look like that. It *looks* like unlove. There is the pain. Am I willing to see my unlove, to focus on it, and grow more loving? If in its coming love looks like unlove, how can anyone endure the coming of love? Because it *tastes* like joy. Its coming is accompanied by a strange, unpredictable joy. And that joy sustains the lover and enables him to serve with gladness. The coming of the Spirit is the coming into my heart of a new ability to love someone. It makes me conscious, though, not of my new loving, but of an insensitivity so much deeper within me than I had imagined. And it floods the heart with joy.

God is wanting through Jesus to bring about a new kind of people, a people who love one another. Jew and Greek united through Jesus. I and my enemy united through Jesus' death. In that uniting, we become a sign to others, a gospel. A piece of great news: God is at work powerfully in the world, delivering us from our antagonisms, and the darkness our competitiveness brings on. It is not His goal to make us anxious to measure our growth, or to have us take delight in our deepening love and faith. Real love is conscious of the terrible needs of others; real faith is in awe with its gaze fixed on the unwavering trustworthiness of the Father.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE GOSPEL FOCUS ON OUR UNLOVING WAYS

Let us look more carefully at the love command, the center of our Gospel.

I mentioned the problems that it raises: how apparently it cannot be taken literally because such love is beyond our power. How can God command us to change our affections? We then substitute for love. "Try to be nice to her." We have even taken to distinguishing between liking and loving, and freeing ourselves from any obligation to like another. What is left in the word "love," when liking is taken out? All the affection is gone. So Jesus is seen to demand from us an affectionless loving. By dropping out affection we set up a situation where we can feel ourselves doing reasonably well in fulfilling the love command.

In this way we deal with the love command exactly as Paul sees the Jews dealing with the Law. By receiving the Law, Paul says, the Jews were given a path to awareness of their sinfulness and of their great need for salvation. It was intended to prepare them for the coming of a redeemer, by drawing them into the truth about themselves: their inability to fulfill the Law.

But, in order to avoid the despair that accompanies the knowledge of the self as sinner, the Jews rewrote the Law, interpreting out of it all the weightier matters, such as justice and love. Once these were removed, the Law became possible to

fulfill. As a result, on Jesus' appearance, there were many, apparently pious people, who felt no need for a redeemer.

We do the same with the New Law. We must see ourselves as all right. To avoid the condemnation that will come if we accept the love command literally, we take the core out of the command. It brings the command down to a level where we can fulfill it, and we rest there. The gift of the Holy Spirit which God is so intent on gracing us with becomes irrelevant.

What if we accept the love command literally? What if we accept as a fact that, by using the word *love*, Jesus did not have in mind a special religious meaning, but actually intended it as most people would understand it. If that is so, then we must relearn, and be constantly relearning, the meaning of love. To counter our inclination to minimize any obligation, we must constantly be putting back into the word its full meaning.

When St. Thomas Aquinas talks of love, he says that the lover takes the beloved as his other self. Is that a part of what Jesus meant? Must I take my enemy as my other self? When we assert: God loves me, am I saying that He takes me as His other self, or am I just saying that while He does indeed love me, He may not like me at all? Once I start dealing in an affectionless loving, the good news of God's love for me loses much of its splendor. If I start to measure out an affectionless love to others, it will be measured out to me. It will be my chosen world.

But if I accept the full meaning of the love command—while it will condemn me because of my lack of real love—it will free me to trust in His real and full love, a love of a father for his child. That condemnation is only a step on the path of focusing my life on God's gifts rather than on my sense of spiritual wealth. Through the love command we are drawn up above the world of our own powers into the world of gifts. We are forced to rely on the coming into our lives of the Holy Spirit. Without the gift of the Spirit, our lives have no meaning whatsoever. The inability to love as we are commanded brings us into a state of helplessness, and shifts our attention from what we can and

cannot do, to what God alone can do. He becomes our savior, coming to us in our loveless prison.

The love command is not given to us so that we can, by some measurable behavior, fulfill it. Not at all. Its fulfillment is hidden from us. Any resting in a sense of doing fine in the area of love is not from the Lord. From Him comes a sense of a vast chasm that separates us from the love that we should have. And from Him comes that welcome promise, "How can you believe that the Father will not give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?"

By means of the love command, we enter into a truer image of ourselves. We are not in the same league with Jesus; the love we see in Him is not found within ourselves. And this is not just for beginners, a purgative stretch. As the believer draws nearer to God and becomes ever more perfect, his consciousness of his lovelessness becomes more and more acute, and precise. He not only knows that he is a sinner, but he can *prove* it; and this the beginner is reluctant to do. These two go hand in hand: a deeper entry into God's intimacy and a bolder honesty about our manipulating, jealous, judgmental, resentful ways, our fear of true love. What is present in the saint's life is not a freedom from lovelessness, but a freedom to look honestly at it. He gets to see a self that had been a stranger to him but was well known and loved by God, and whose great need for a redeemer moved God to send Jesus.

Thomas tells us that in real love the lover has affection for the other just as he has affection for himself.⁷ Is this what God is commanding me? To have for my enemy an affection such as I have for myself? God gazes on my enemy with great affection. God's desire is to share that affection with me. That is the sending of His Spirit to me, a new heart for me, enabling me to love my enemy as myself. It is a loving I may not want; I may even fear. It can also be a gift I do not believe in. Yet, as Thomas tells us, "it is the Holy Spirit Himself who is the New Testament by effecting love in us—the fulfillment of the Law." Jesus lived and died to make available to us a loving-power that is God's

own, now ours for the asking. As Gustavo Gutierrez puts it, "The only thing that is really new is to accept day by day the gift of the Spirit who makes us love with the fullness with which Christ loves us."⁸

The love command is not about a general feeling toward humanity, but a centering of our attention on our enemy and our lovelessness. The contrast between ourselves and God is most forceful in the contrasting ways we relate to that one person—His fullness of affection and my indifference or anger or even contempt. His desire to clothe me with a share in His affection is the good news. All the joys of intimate knowledge of God come to us only along the path of the coming of love into our unloving. Our life is an accepting. We are given Him, for the asking. He seeks to make us expect from Him, as a gift, a new heart. As long as we feel we are doing reasonably well with the old heart, we will not be eager for His gift.

If your superior told you at breakfast, "Listen, we have a heart transplant for you. I'll drive you to the hospital at 9:15," would you be elated? That depends. If you are in good health, or at least you think you are in good health, then it's a shock and, you hope, a misunderstanding. But if you have been laboring through the corridors, and avoiding staircases, and needing people to help you with any packages, and feeling exhausted all the time, and been waiting for the operation that was held up only because there was no transplant available, then you would be elated.

God is constantly at work leading us toward that true knowledge of the self, the knowledge of our inability to love. Resentment by resentment, we enter the real world of human competitiveness. We see that what is so visible in world wars has its counterpart, and its roots clinging to our own hearts. Our life centers more and more on two realities, the self—which produces a salutary sadness—and the Lord's great giving, the only path out of the inner hell. One who sees himself loveless finds his whole life centered on God's promise of the Spirit.

In the *Enchiridion* also, St. Augustine talks of the uselessness of faith if it does not include a believing that the power to love will be given to me when I ask for it. "For that is the believing which the Apostle urges, a faith which works through loving." What use is it to believe in any person or any creed if it does not include a rescuing from my lovelessness? If my faith does not relate to my inability to love, as a power to change me, what a useless faith that would be! What if I say: "I believe that Jesus was God and that He wants me to change my unloving to love on my own." Such faith is of no value. But if I see myself as doing reasonably well in the area of loving, I may easily come to that belief.

To avoid seeing myself as not needing a new heart—a state of inertia—and to enable me to unite myself with God's desire to change me, I must take steps. St. Augustine spells them out with marvelous precision. "What you do not yet have in the area of loving, ask for so that you may receive it." It is a description of the spiritual life. It is the gospel program for using our energies in order to grow. He is locating the central component of the believer's prayer life.

First of all, he locates for us where we should focus our attention: in the area of loving. Here, of course, he is resonating with the thrust that Jesus Himself pressed upon us. Perfection and loving are identical.

Then he further limits the focus: in the area of loving look at what you do not have. Again like Jesus: "if you love those who love you, what value is there in that?" None, of course. The Kingdom of God, the Kingship of God, is in the relating to those we do not love, who do not love us, who are not grateful, who are hostile, who are unfair, who are manipulative, resentful toward us, or contemptuous. The Spirit will draw near to me in his, the enemy's, face and features. The enemy is the locus of God's present burning desire, and the doorway to all the gifts of deeper faith and more intense joy.

This is so much the case that a Desert Father said, "... if you

go into prayer and the face of your enemy does not come, then you are not in the presence of the living God." What is in God's heart as He comes to me in prayer? A desire to transform me into Himself, love. There He will focus where my wound is most serious, the fear to love that chills my relations with the enemy. That focusing on the face of the enemy is nothing but a uniting of my imagination to God, letting His will, His concern, His focus become mine.

Prayer is an attitude of expecting. In prayer we expect God to give us what we need to fulfill His will. We take for granted that God will do so. That is perfect prayer. As Augustine says, "Faith asks for what the Law commands." Faith asks for love. It is such faith that makes the burden light, the yoke sweet. "Without the gift of God, without the Holy Spirit through whom charity is poured into our hearts, the Law can order us but it cannot help us." For the person of faith, the task imposed by the love command becomes a willingness to receive gifts, and no task at all. Am I willing to live out my life on the presupposition that the fulfillment of the love command is mine for the asking?

Had God not ordered us to love so perfectly, we would never have come to know the lofty nature of the gifts He desires to give us. What a frustration for God, then, when we reduce the command to an affectionless loving. Once we do that, we no longer need affection. We no longer bother with it. We no longer seek it from God. His desire to share with us the affection He has for our enemy is blocked.

This experience of our helplessness, our inability to love specific people, is not unique to beginners. In fact, it is frequently not present in the beginning. It is only with the coming of a certain freedom into our lives that such honesty can be endured. The focus of the advanced is so heavily fixed on their unloving ways that they see themselves in a very negative light; they find themselves "loathsome." This is far from what we feel to be a healthy psychological approach. By all our human laws they should be depressed and hard to deal with, but it isn't so.

Their ability to shut down their defense mechanisms frees them to become more sensitive to people's needs. As their need for building a positive self-image fades, energies are released to heighten the powers of their sensitivity-antennas. Seeing others in need energizes them to a life of service. And an unexplainable consolation makes that a "serving in gladness."

To think that some day I will be able to look at myself as loving, with all my lovelessness left behind me, is to raise illusory hopes. That vision of myself as loving is not for me, to be consoled by it; but it is a promise of the Lord. It is my future; and to the degree that it is already realized, it is in the Lord's vision of me, not in my vision of myself. There, in His vision, it is kept for the day of judgment when He shall surprise me with it. It is His secret, and it results from His secret working. We are not invited to possess it, to dissect it, to uncover it.

In one sense, then, the growing into the love command produces a growing darkness. The self-image is denuded of love. The self sees its own poverty more and more clearly. Into that darkness shines the real loving of God. How He loves me "anyway," and how He loves my enemy with the real affection of a father! Our humility and unworthiness are bathed in His warm affection for us. We become very unconscious of all the good He is working within us. We live in faith. That anxious attention to "How am I doing?" gets swallowed up in the terrible needs of our brothers and sisters.