
Holiness as Social Holiness

A transcript of Roland Hearn's presentation for the Authenticity in a Culture of Masks Retreat

This presentation comes from a retreat called, "Authenticity in a Culture of Masks," presented by the COMPASS Initiative. As we spend time together today, I think that most of the concepts you see here, you will probably identify as having some idea of already, but there might be a lot new today. As we put it all together, connecting the dots, we are hoping that you will see new ways of thinking about the struggle of life that we all deal with. This comes from over 30 years of my own personal ministry and a number of years of academic study. Putting the pieces together helped me deal with my own personal struggle, doubts, and fears that I have had all of my life. The interesting thing that I've discovered is that we all have the same things. As we look at this today, we are going to make the point that every issue that speaks to the life of the church must be centered on the primacy of love. By the time we finish today I believe you will affirm that this is true, if you don't already.

In this presentation, we will seek to address these issues: the transformational nature of love, the healing power of love, the nature of the community of love, and leading in love. Leaders are called to lead with love, not with authority and control. That's the point I am making in this presentation.

We get our theological understandings and sensitivities from John Wesley, and John Wesley centered his theological thought in love. In "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," he wrote these words. These are old words and there is not a lot of flow in them, but I think you will get the point.

Another ground of these, and a thousand mistakes is, the not considering deeply that love is the highest gift of God-humble, gentle, patient love; that all visions, revelations, manifestations whatever, are little things compared to love; and that all the gifts above mentioned are either the same with or infinitely inferior to it... It were well you should be thoroughly sensible of this the heaven of heavens is love. There is nothing higher in religion - there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way. And when you are asking others, 'Have you received this blessing or that blessing?' if you mean anything but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them upon a false scent. Settle it then in your heart, that from the moment God has saved you from all sin, you are to aim at nothing more, but more of that love described in the thirteenth of Corinthians. You can go no higher than this till you are carried into Abraham's bosom.

Even in that language, it makes the point, doesn't it. Love is the center of our faith and without centering on love, we miss something. Love is the essential expression of the nature of God: God is love. Discipleship is becoming like Christ – the process of transformation by God's love: becoming conformed to and transformed by that love. I like to relate it like this, we are brought into the kingdom of God by God's love. We journey on this journey of love and grace until we walk into glory, a glory of love. It is love at the beginning, love at the end, and love all the way along. We are not transformed by anything else. We are not transformed by our Bible studies. We are not transformed by information. We are not transformed by exercises. We are transformed by love.

Now, as we will see a little bit later, love is measured to us through a lot of those things, but it is love that does the transformation, and that love is the presence of God. The community of faith, the church, is the context in which that transformational process is lived out. Community is both product of, and essential to, that process. The reason the church exists is to love. It is the context of love that is the context of transformation. When we see the church in terms of programs or even in terms of achievements and goals, we misunderstand the nature of the church. The church is to create the community of love, therefore create the community of transformation.

Many years ago, when I was struggling with my own deep sense of worthlessness and hopelessness, as a pastor, waking up every day feeling like I was going to mess something up, I ended up having an emotional breakdown and ended up in the hospital. There in the hospital, I wrote these words, "God must be God and love must be enough." I came to that place in my life where I recognized that God alone could be God. I couldn't be God. And when I relate to God as God, I actually relate to him **as** God – not my genie, not my servant, not my wish fairy – but God – God the creator of the universe. God must be God, and love was my only vehicle to take this journey of life, to influence people, to direct people. As a pastor, I always thought that control was the way you got things done. You tell people, "You need to do this," "You need to do that." But the fact is, if I cannot move people through a place of love, whatever we might get to is, in fact, illegitimate. Love must be enough.

So, we need to understand love. One of the most important concepts that I ever wrestled with, and became convinced of – and if you get nothing else from this presentation, take this away with you – Love is worth. Love equals worth. If you love someone, you value them. If you value someone, you love them. You try speaking words of "de-valuing" into a person's life and then tell them you love them and see how much they believe you. In fact, we know that to be true ourselves, don't we? We've had people say that they love us and then treat us in ways that deny the validity of our lives, or take away from our sense of being. We feel controlled and manipulated, and it brings a question to our minds. Are we in fact loved by that person?

When we talk about worth, we are talking about honor. And in fact, when we read the Scriptures, we see many times this concept of blessing and honor resonating through Scriptures. It is talking about communicating worth. When you honor somebody, you value them. They are worth something to you. That is in fact an expression of love for them. To honor people is to give them dignity, freedom, affirmation, and recognition.

To live out of love is to reflect that worth. It is to honor individuals. It is to empower communities. When you love into a community you empower that community to become what it was intended to become, whether that be the church or the neighborhood. So when we think about the church impacting the neighborhoods in which we live, what we've got to think about how does the church empower the neighborhood to become that which it was intended to be?

By all means, we must resist control. This is counterintuitive to many, many people. If I want something done, I've got to tell people what they've got to do and I've got to control them in one way or another, or I've got to manipulate them. I've got to get this done. I can love them later, but I'm going to control them now because we've got stuff that needs to be done. Let me say this, you can either love people or you can control people. You can't do both at the same time. Finally, have confidence in the Holy Spirit and in others. We just trust that God is at work. That is interpreted then as having confidence in what he is doing in other people's lives.

How did we come to the place we are in, in the world today? Of course, in our Christian understanding, we see the Fall as the first step in the creation of this brokenness. Here are some images of brokenness. Sin dominated humanity's existence, as a result of the Fall. We cannot adequately frame the utter distortion of sin in our lives. This is really important for us to get ahold of. The way we see the world, the way we see others, the way we see our own life has been distorted as a result of that brokenness that comes from the Fall. Our perspectives, our understandings, our reactions, indeed our entire psyche is radically distorted by the power of sin. Even when we come to a place of faith, that distortion still remains in our minds. How do I know that to be true? We know that the Christian journey is a journey of becoming Christ like. If we are continually becoming Christ like, we must be becoming Christ like from something. Right? But what is the something we are coming from? Our distortions. Those distortions are distortions of our minds that result out of our brokenness.

We experience sin as "worth-lessness." When sin impacts my life, whether it is by me committing sin or having someone sin against me, the result of that sin in my own experience is worth-lessness. I feel worth less because of sin. It never adds to our value. It may be an experience of sin that temporarily adds some kind of emotional impact, but the long term impact is one of worth-lessness and that culminates in worthlessness. You and I all carry with us an awareness of what it is like to feel worthless. It is one of the common experiences of humanity. You will not find anyone, except those living in some level of pathological deceit, that does not struggle with the sense of worthlessness. The effect of sin is a scarring of our identity.

So how we see ourselves, the way that we know we are, has in fact been scarred by sin. We are our own. We are not God's. We are lost. Our identity, at its very core, is best understood as shaped by loss – loss of love, loss of worth, isolation, emptiness, and despair.

Are you excited yet? Such a reality is well expressed in the increasingly developing understanding of shame. About fifty years ago, psychological research began to navigate into this space of shame. Prior to that time, things we struggled with were captured under other emotional experiences. For about fifty years, change has been coming on the horizon. All of the research into shame speaks about the centrality of those concepts we just spoke about, in terms of the lostness in relationship with God.

Shame is identity. I am wrong. It's not that I've done wrong, but I am wrong. I am a failure. I am worthless. It's an identity statement. Shame is perception. I am not good enough. Shame is how I feel you feel about me. So I'm thinking what you think about me, and you think that I'm worthless. You don't, of course, but shame always says that these people think that I'm worthless. It impacts us in many, many different ways. Shame is relational. In relationship my worthlessness will be discovered, so I need to withdraw. One of the primary indicators of shame is that need to withdraw, that need to pull back. Shame pushes us away from relationship. In fact, I would go so far as to say that anyone who has experienced a broken relationship has experienced the impact of shame. Relationships break around shame. It's a sense of worthlessness, something you are doing is communicating to me that I am worthless. In my response, my defense to that communicates the same thing, from your perception, back to you, and our relationships begin to sever. Our relationships begin to fall apart.

These are the characteristics of shame, so we can better understand it. Shame is that sense of exposure. People are looking at me. They know who I am. They see me and I don't want to be seen. A second characteristic is the need to hide. Remember the account in Genesis of the Fall? The last part of chapter two in Genesis says, "They were naked and not ashamed." They had no shame. I thought, for years and years, that this meant they lived an idyllic existence. They were naked. They were beautiful. They had no reason to feel bad about themselves, and so it is just idyllic. But there is a much deeper reason that that phrase is in there. For the Hebrew reader, to be naked was to be in a state of shame. You can see that when David danced before the Lord naked, and his wife was so ashamed of him love stopped right there. Jesus crucified on the cross is naked, and that is a direct declaration that he is in a space of shame. So what did they do when they discovered they were naked and ashamed? They hid themselves, didn't they? That is the biblical record. They made clothes and hid themselves.

The next characteristic of shame is this, a perceived incongruence between expectations and achievements. A perceived incongruence between expectations and achievements – what does that mean? Simply it means that what you expect of me and what I am able to do has a gap between them. This functions in almost all, if not all, institutions. Institutions have institutional expectations. Our senses that I am not going to be able to fulfill those expectations creates a gap. Institutions work on shame. They see that it is a force to keep people moving towards the goals that are communicated.

Another characteristic is inappropriateness. I don't fit in. Have you ever had that feeling on the first day of school, or the first day of a new job, or the first day of coming into a new experience, or anything like that, where you walk into the situation and look around and think I don't belong here? In fact, I have that experience regularly. If I walk into a shopping mall, somehow I will convince myself that every single person in this mall knows exactly where they are going and exactly what they are doing, and I have no clue. I am just scrabbling around trying to find out, but I don't want them to know that I don't know, so I've got to find where that map is that will tell me where I need to go, otherwise they will see that I am worthless. That is actually shame at work right there.

Shame is a threat to trust. I think that if I get too close to you, you're going to do something that will hurt me or shame me. So I'm not sure I can trust you.

You need to act trustworthy before I can trust you, because if I trust you, you're going to hurt me. That is the shame reality.

The final characteristic of shame is the contempt of self. I hate myself. I hate myself. I just want to die. You've heard that, and you may have even thought that.

I want to make a connection here. For the idea of the sinful nature to have real meaning, it must capture the reality of the loss of our identity in God – and the reality that we are inadequately aware of that loss. Loss is our norm. Sinful nature is the theological construct and we link it with the Fall in the garden, but for that to have any real meaning it's got to reflect that sense of lostness in my life, and that I don't know that I'm lost. Out of that lostness I don't realize it. That can be directly correlated to our human experience of shame. I cannot make that point too strongly. What we describe as the sinful nature, this lostness, is adequately reflected in how we experience shame in our lives. That loss is as a result of an absence of an adequate relationship with God – a relationship designed to shape our identity in His image, which by its very nature is essentially relational love. Our sense of self (our self-image), the understanding we have of ourselves and our existence, is one that is shaped by lost relationship (sinful nature) rather than the One in whose image we were created.

That is shame!

We need healing, transformation, and wholeness. We don't need fixing. We don't need duty. We don't need obligation. The transformation of identity doesn't come naturally. We are, for all intents and purposes, who we believe we are. We may think certain thoughts, and somebody comes along and says, "That's not right. It's this way." And we can go, "Oh yah, I see that. That's right." When we are dealing with identity issues, we are dealing with the way that we see ourselves. We can't see ourselves in any other way than the way we see ourselves. So when we are talking about this identity of shame, this identity of loss, this sinful-nature-scarred identity, and we are talking about transformation, we need to recognize that is not going to come easy. It's going to be a long hard process, but it is something that we must engage in. It happens in two ways. There may be other minor things, but this, in my view, is the way our identity is transformed from that identity of shame. It happens in the presence of the Holy Spirit. We believe that the Holy Spirit fills our lives with love. That's our daily transformation. We believe it happens in a community of grace. We mitigate and marginalize the effectiveness of the Church when we think of the Church in terms of worship services and programs. Let's be honest, most of us think about Church that way most of the time. It's the routine we are in. Sometimes we just need to put a screeching halt to that and recognize those are expressions of things that the Church does, but the Church exists as the place for transformation.

This is very important. To have shame does NOT mean you have sinned. Just because you have shame in your life doesn't mean you have sinned. We may have all sinned as a response to our shame. So with shame being a part of our lives we have acted out of that space and we have sinned. Like the sinful nature, it is the reality we are born into. We are born into the place of shame. We are born into this brokenness. We are born into this lostness. Sin is best thought of not as activity but as broken relationship - the things that my life brings forth that causes broken relationship either to other people, to God, or to myself.

One of profound expressions of sin is the failure to become the person God has called me to become. He has designed me to be a being of love, and when I live short of that, that is sin. Recognizing that sin comes from my shame and that shame flows from that sin, we see this circle happening. But just because I'm sitting in a space of feeling lousy about myself, the solution to that isn't saying, "What sin did I commit?" That shame is about my being.

The solution to sin and an identity shaped by sin and shame is love. It's a ___ solution, isn't it? The solution is love. It is God's love administered to our lives through God's grace. Love is the answer. If shame and sin are the absence of love, then it makes sense that love is the response to shame and sin. The effect of love is the restoration of those things fundamental to the image of God in which we are made – all of which combine to fulfill the deepest need for relational love. Love is the only adequate response to sin. We might think punishment is what we need to do for sin, or control is what we need to do for sin, but that never works. It has never worked. Love goes to the root of sin and brings healing.

Let's think about this connection. As Wesleyans in the Church of the Nazarene, our classical understanding of entire sanctification, well understood as the heart filled with perfect love, is an adequate and total response to the sinful nature. It is therefore a response to the shame identity. Our identity is found in Christ and not in our distorted shame filled sense of self. At the core, we are transformed from darkness and shame to light and love. This is Galatians 2:20.

My ego identity [my distorted self] is crucified with Christ so that it is no longer my ego identity that lives but Christ that lives in me; the life which now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, [here is the part that we need to capture and take hold of] who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Love is the answer to ego identity. That he gave himself for me says exactly that he values me. He loved me and he expressed it in the worth of the reality of giving himself for me. It's a beautiful verse.

So let's make these links between sanctification and shame. We talk theologically about conversion being initial sanctification. It is the beginning of the process of becoming Christ like. It is the acceptance of love. So why do so many people have a somewhat euphoric experience at the point of conversion? It is because of the presence of God becoming real in their life, but it is being appropriated through this sense of acceptance of love. I am valued. I am accepted. Yes, this incredible praise begins to flow from our life because we have discovered the truth. I am loved. I am accepted, which is a value statement.

Entire sanctification is actually the transformation of the core of our identity. In days gone by, we used to preach often about this idea of laying down things. I lay down my past, my future, my hopes, my fears, my job, my family, my pains. Whatever it may be, I lay it at the feet of Jesus. Theologically we call that consecration, but if you think about all those things that we labeled, those are all identity formers. So what we are actually saying in the act of consecration is, "I lay down all of my identity formers at your feet, Jesus, and I ask that you be the one who forms my identity, that you would fill my heart with your love. That's entire sanctification, and that's actually understandable. That is actually accessible.

Sometimes, I myself, processing this theologically for years, couldn't quite get my head around what was actually going on. It's an act of faith so you just do it because the preacher says I've got to. So you approach God for this experience of entire sanctification. But what is actually happening is that I lay down my identity and allow his identity to become mine, and that is transformation. That's why we say our hearts are filled with love, because they are filled with his presence.

Then we have this concept of progressive sanctification that we've always believed in but haven't understood exactly what is happening. Progressive sanctification is the transformation of my psyche because my identity has been transformed. We are actually going to struggle with shame for all of our lives. There are these processes going on in our minds that have been shaped by shame. But now when shame arises, our identity says, "That's not true of who you are," so we are able to submit that shame to that identity, and win one more battle. That is progressive sanctification. That goes on throughout our entire lives.