

Gospel Vulnerability

The Key to Costly Love

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MARY SHARON MOORE

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Gospel Vulnerability

The Key to Costly Love

Mary Sharon Moore

AWAKENING VOCATIONS
Springfield, Oregon

GOSPEL VULNERABILITY
The Key to Costly Love

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To my fellow workers at the
Egan Warming Centers in Lane County, Oregon

Though termed “volunteers,”
your steadfast commitment to serve
“the least of these” on bitter cold winter nights
reveals the power, beauty, and urgency
of Costly Love in our world today.

You may, or possibly not, “follow Jesus,”
but you walk the Good Road with
firm intention and strong hearts.
I see you. I love you.

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Opening Words

The Challenge of Gospel Vulnerability

The most intentional, resolute, and consequential choice I have ever made was to follow this man Jesus. It didn't come once in the fervor of an altar call, but in a job interview, and sometime later, in my parked car, when I had plenty of time to think.

These are just two of the stories I share in these pages. I discover that my choice to intentionally and resolutely follow Jesus determines how I spend my time, my energies and abilities, my public presence—daily.

Love strong enough to hold my life together, especially when it falls apart, is what I call Costly Love, the One Love, Love enfleshed. I know this Love as Jesus of the Gospels, who dwells in the hidden Holy One, the GOD of many names, and whose Spirit is my breath. This Love is my sure knowing.

As a writer in the public square, my aim is not to “push a brand” but to open fresh conversations on the power, beauty, and urgency of living Costly Love in our world today. I am motivated by the teachings and radical life witness of this man Jesus.

Why intentionally choose to learn from and follow this convicted troublemaker, this Holy Outlaw? Why? Because he gave *his* intentional and resolute *Yes* to follow the dream, the deep desiring, of this hidden Holy One. He “set his face like flint,” as the prophet Isaiah puts it. I strive to do the same.

Each day, each hour, sometimes each moment, places me at the threshold of what is new, untested, unrehearsed, unknown. Daily I sense my innate vulnerability, and this is a good thing. It's a good road I'm on, the Good Road. I'm pretty sure I've seen you on it, too.

You and I, by virtue of our shared humanity, live vulnerable lives. Even more so we who strive to walk this Good Road, or feel at least curious, intrigued, or drawn to walk it alongside others.

Christian faith—seeing as Jesus saw, feeling as Jesus felt, believing as Jesus believed, trusting as Jesus trusted—renders us vulnerable *exactly* at those points where we would much rather feel secure.

I am speaking of a living, dynamic, radical trust which is very different from any neatly wrapped package of doctrines and rituals handed on, too often unopened, unexplored, and therefore insufficiently lived, from one generation to the next.

We search for what is real, because we sense that something inside us is incomplete, waiting to emerge, leap forth, and burst into what we've not yet named, a living flame of Love, all consuming, life-giving, transforming what it touches into the Spirit of the living Christ.

Costly Love, I say, is *outward-facing servant-hearted kinship with another*, with others, which transcends differences and interior resistance. Costly Love carries an impelling sense of solidarity with the other, *for the sake of the other*. Jesus calls this Agape (ä-GÄ-pā) Love which he shares with his followers and commands them also to share (see John 15:9-17; see also 21:15-17).¹

Costly Love expresses a selfless *generosity* toward the good of the other. This other may be actual kin to me, or someone I encounter and will never see again. Costly Love is not reserved for the people we like, nor for those who are obviously oppressed. It flows where it will, which is everywhere. This challenges our world of dualities—"the deserving" versus "the foe."

Costly Love is not an expression of "approval" but of deep yearning for the good, the unshackling, the liberation of the other, *every* other, for the sake of their humanity and the healing of the world. This is what Jesus means when he insists: *Love* your enemies (see Matthew 5:44), those whose very existence grieves you.

We do not hear this language, so what does it mean?

Costly Love: Another name for the Buried Treasure, the Pearl of Great Price

Our lives are unthinkingly noisy (which means, also, unthinkingly violent). We build the life that *we* have in mind, the life we've been taught to seek. We also are decent, kind people, willing to respond generously in times of need. It's just that, for the most part, we've been inculturated from an early age, ensnared, you might say, in the sticky web of greedy, grasping King Mammon (see Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13).

Invitations into real, authentic, wholehearted engagement in life are, in great part, lost on us. We find every reason to *not* dial down the noise, not just yet, not now. We keep a firm grip on the linear, the logical, the measurable, the acquirable. We seem unable to step toward, and even embrace, what is whole-making, costly, that requires handing over everything we have for the buried Treasure, the most sought Pearl, precious beyond all others (see Matthew 13:44-46).

So, to seek out and embrace Costly Love, the hidden Treasure, the costly Pearl, we first must undergo a conversion of attitude and habit, and opt for what reveals the deeper value of our being, our humanity, our meaning and purpose in life. For me, the terms *hidden Treasure*, the *costly Pearl*, and Costly Love itself, are not so much nouns as verbs, not so much things as ways of *showing up in the world* which point us to the hidden Mystery, the Holy One, whom many call GOD.

¹ My thanks to David Strahan for reminding me of this powerful word.

Jesus: On a mission; therefore, so are we

I speak here of risk, of total, straight-ahead trust, that will cause you to abandon your nets, the tools of your trade, your career path, your carefully crafted plans, your comfort, your many forms of security, because Someone looked into your eyes, ignited your soul, and spoke your name in a way that *changed everything* in your one precious hard-won life.

You step out of the boat in night's darkest hour, in the *midst* of the squall, because the One whom you are convinced will never let you go has beckoned you to *come!*

I'm going to guess that most people, most of the time, can't fully go there. Why? It's *just too risky*.

Getting honest with, and embracing, our innate vulnerability is the key to understanding Jesus. It's the key that unlocks the truth of *his* humanity, *his* vulnerability, *his* vision, *his* mission, *his* way of showing up in an oppressed, unjust, and suffering world, *his* way of girding his heart amid religious oppression, not for reactive violence but in preemptive Love, at all times, straight through to the end, and then beyond.

"Follow me" is Jesus' first, continuous, and also ultimate invitation to us, personally, and together as community—whether we are at the center of community or laboring at its margins. It's an invitation into a lifetime of *willing* vulnerability: to meet this man Jesus where *he* is, to live with a good heart, to walk the Good Road with him, and to love whom and what he loves.

Don't simply *think* about me, he urges; *follow* me. I'm here with you. Walk *with* me.

Jesus: Revolutionary of the heart

Jesus was a revolutionary, living simultaneously at the margins and at the center of a land occupied by Roman rule. But he was not first a political or even social revolutionary. He was a *revolutionary of the heart*.

The word *revolution* is rooted in the word *revolve*: *re-* meaning "back," and *volvere* meaning to "roll" or "walk." So I picture a *revolution* here as a walking, or rolling, or orbiting, perhaps, around an axis or gravitational center.

With Jesus, this gravitational center is Love, expressed in interior relationship with the hidden GOD, and also in outward-facing relationship of self with humankind and all of Creation.

Jesus' life-as-revolution also was *revelatory*, one continuous unveiling of the Divine, hidden in plain sight, for everyone to see.

Jesus came not to turn things upside down, but to set unjust social arrangements rightside up, in the ways of divine justice, right relations, right action, compassion, for the flourishing of all Creation, including us.

In his great inaugural teaching, in the Gospel of Matthew (chapters 5-7), Jesus speaks not as a preacher with an opinion, but with the soul-shaking authority of a prophet. “You have heard it said . . .,” he cries out; “but *I* say to you . . .” He speaks with the full force of Teacher On Fire with fresh invitations from a just and loving GOD.

Divine revolutionary Love heals, purifies, and reshapes individual hearts, attitudes, and ways of being in the world—including the world of relationships, and by extension, the social and political order. Which is why it is so important that you and I, today, *show up*, starting close in, locally, to shape and inhabit the Land of the Rightside Up, in the *midst* of the Land of the Upside Down, through acts of justice, integrity, compassion, generosity, and joy.²

The challenge? Rearrange your life

In the Beatitudes (see Matthew 5:3-12), Jesus shows us how to engage our hearts with the heart of GOD *in this world*. “Be poor in spirit,” he says; “grieve what needs to be grieved; be meek. *Hunger and thirst for justice!* Be merciful, clean of heart. *Be peacemakers!*” he urges. “And don’t resist persecution for my sake.”

He acknowledges that few are able to actually walk the narrow road with him that leads to the Beatitude life (see Matthew 7:13-14).

To live the willingly vulnerable life in this all-in way, I discover that I need to *arrange my life* around this man Jesus. I need to arrange every dimension of my life around the truth and beauty, the vision, the core convictions, and the daily invitations he offers me to walk *with* him, to go where he goes, and to love whom and what he loves.

I feel an urgency to do this now, to arrange my life *where it is now*, in its present decade, amid these complex times, for the sake of the world I touch, and which GOD still so achingly loves.

I hope you feel this urgency, too, in the here-and-now, as you consider what “walking with Jesus” might look like for *you*, on your courageous and life-shaping journey. I hope to show a way that is simple and beautiful, not complex but challenging, an invitation to Costly Love. May *nothing* hold you back.

In these pages you’ll hear five stories and a statement of faith; you’ll learn four repeatable steps, and discover endless opportunities to acknowledge, enter into, and willingly embrace your own vulnerabilities in living a life of Costly Love.

² I first mention the Lands of the Rightside Up and the Upside Down in my book *Anointed for a Purpose* (Awakening Vocations, 2012), and explore these terms more extensively in *Dare to Believe, Rise Up to Act* (Awakening Vocations, 2019).

Our exploration includes:

1. Vulnerability: Two Definitions
2. Embracing the Vulnerable Life
3. Gospel Vulnerability: Expression of Radical Trust
4. Vulnerability of Core Convictions
5. The Prophetic Core of Gospel Vulnerability
6. Gospel Vulnerability and the Mission of Costly Love
7. Practical Steps to Living Gospel Vulnerability

Each part ends with a takeaway and an assignment: to ponder a thought-provoking question or two. Consider these elements your built-in personal or small group Study Guide.

Shall we go?