

When Your Child Breaks Your Heart

Acts 6:7-15, 7:54-60

The very last thing that a mother wants to experience is the death of her child. It's a grief no mother should ever have to know but, unfortunately, all too many do. It's a sorrow which is magnified horribly when she is forced to view the way in which her child passes, especially if it involves severe suffering and agony. It may be easier to live with the reality of her child's death, than to witness the suffering that precedes it, something for which she would do anything possible in her power to prevent.

As difficult as it is to imagine and as painful as it is to remember (should this have been true for you), the mercy that must never be overlooked or undervalued is the human capacity to love a child even unto death. Love such as this is deeper than can be quantified and far more impactful than the child is likely ever to know or appreciate. A mother's love is often greater than even she can reasonably assess and the suffering of her child is what reveals its fiercest jealousy and fire. As Agatha Christie once said:

A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity, it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path.

Apparently, even Agatha could discover no mystery in a mother's heart.

Yet, as powerful as a mother's love may be (especially that which will defend her child at any cost), it may not be the most effective protection a mother can offer. Arguably, the wisest way for a mother to express her love is by providing her child the skills and wisdom, as well as the example, to make their own decisions and to inspire the courage to take on challenges and risks, as well as to express the ability to love and forgive oneself and

others. In other words, a mother's best gift is to help her child become the fully developed and mature person that he or she can be —emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. More often than not, that is what an adult child will value most from a mother's love.

This kind of love is evident in Trevor Noah's memoir of his upbringing in South Africa during apartheid. Noah is currently the star of "The Daily Show" on Comedy Central. The book is humorous (as you might expect), but also compelling and thoughtful—one that makes you wonder how the boy who literally was born a crime (from an illegal interracial tryst) and who grew up in dire poverty in various places like Soweto with his single mother and later an abusive stepfather—with all the trouble he got into and the disadvantages and obstacles he faced—ended up attaining the international celebrity he now enjoys. Much of it had to do with his mother, which he readily acknowledges.

Toward the end of the book, Noah shared the alarming story of when his mother was shot by his drunken stepfather and he had to pay for her emergency care since she was without health insurance. He had to make the choice of saving his mother's life while risking going into lifelong debt for the hospital bill.

What if I spend that money and then she dies anyway? Do I get a refund? I actually imagined my mother, as frugal as she was, waking up from a coma and saying, "You spent how much? You idiot. You should have saved that money to look after your brothers. And what about my brothers? They would be my responsibility now. I would have to raise the family, which I couldn't do if I was millions in debt, and it was always my mother's solemn vow that raising my brothers was the one thing I would never have to do. Even as my career took off, she'd refused any help I offered. "I don't want you paying for your mother the same way I had to pay for mine," she'd say...

My mother's greatest fear was that I would end up paying the black tax, that I would get trapped by the cycle of poverty and violence that came before me. She had always promised me that I would be the one to break that cycle. I would be the one to move forward and not back. And as I looked at that nurse outside

the emergency room, I was petrified that the moment I handed her my credit card, the cycle would just continue and I'd get sucked right back in.

People say all the time that they'd do anything for the people they love. But would you really? Would you do anything? Would you give everything? I don't know that a child knows that kind of selfless love. A mother, yes. A mother will clutch her children and jump from a moving car to keep them from harm [which she did early in his life]. She will do it without thinking. But don't think the child knows how to do that, not instinctively. It's something the child has to learn.

I pressed my credit card into the nurse's hand.

"Do whatever you have to do. Just please help my mom."¹

It was what his mother would have done for him without a second thought. Her love for Trevor was worth everything to her, and now it was his turn to express the same. The good news is that she not only survived being shot in the head and leg, but miraculously the bullet barely missed the spinal cord and critical parts of the brain. As Noah writes: "My mother was out of the hospital in four days. She was back at work in seven."

Noah credits his mother for her toughness, her faithfulness, her religious devotion, and her incredible example and sacrifice for him. This is one of the things that one generation can do for another—love them so much that they will, not only provide the example they need for how to make choices in life, but to make the necessary sacrifices so that those following will learn and have a better opportunity than those who came before.

It's the type of commitment to selfless altruism that first-generation immigrants have often made in this country for their children and their children's children. At huge risk, they uproot their lives to come to this country usually for the opportunity to improve their children's lives. The love they have for their children is to provide them the opportunity to acquire the ability to live wisely and well—even giving up what they might

¹ Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*, Spiegel & Grau, 2016, pg. 279.

have for themselves—safety and welfare—in order that their children or grandchildren will benefit. That’s what love is and it is what love does.

Perhaps this is why, when such sacrifices are made, children who don’t recognize what’s been done for them, or don’t take advantage of what’s come their way, or don’t learn the same lessons about how to live selflessly for others, will break the heart of their parents. Parents can’t control the lives of their children for very long, so they are left to witness what influence, for better or for worse, they have had upon them and how it plays out in their lives. One of the heaviest burdens in parenting is to feel as if your child hasn’t learned what to value in life or how to conduct themselves, where they have acted foolishly and irresponsibly or, worse, were needlessly harmful to others. No parent wants to see their child reach a point of self-destruction and despair. For should that happen, it may be a sorrow that breaks the heart even more than losing life itself.

Every once in a while, when I read about people in the news suffering a tragedy, or for stupid (and often illegal) things they’ve done, I wonder what those closest to them see and feel, attempting, as much as I can, to empathize with their frustration, fears, and anguish over the situation. When I do that, I’m less inclined to be unfair and judgmental about circumstances where I don’t know the whole story. Because my own family has gone through some crazy stuff, I know firsthand how shorthand descriptions of bad behavior never cover all there is to know about a disturbing situation or an offending person. In the public eye, there’s a tendency to only magnify what’s bad and then condemn, when usually there’s another side to the person or situation that contrasts, if not contradicts, what the public sees and knows. Public judgment is often

permanent, even when it's poor judgment. People who have done some awful things aren't necessarily evil people.

For instance, I tried to do that with Aaron Hernandez, the former Patriots player, who had so much going for him, only to bring about his own violent downfall. The sadness many felt a month ago when he took his life, reminded me of what my own family went through five years ago. The circumstances were different, but speculation is the taking of his life was done to somehow offer a redemptive benefit to the family, which it couldn't and wouldn't do. Is that how to mend a broken heart? I had to wonder what Hernandez's family and, particularly, his mother thought as she buried her son—who had so much potential, so much given to him, but lost it foolishly and recklessly—a stark contrast to Trevor Noah's choices. What broke his mother's heart more—that he ended his life, or that Aaron had foolishly lived it in the way he did? As angry as she might be at what he did, the truth is, a mother's heart only breaks because of her love for her child—a love that will not let him go.

Such empathy I've also tried to apply when looking at this story in Acts about the first Christian martyr, Stephen. That might seem odd since it's only an ancient story, but it's to understand it from more than what meets the eye. What's the message behind the scenes and drama? Even though Luke presented it as a noble and heroic act of martyrdom, the truth is, when this occurred, it would have seemed quite different. When Stephen was stoned to death, it would have been a humiliating act of public shame and condemnation. What would his mother or father have thought? We don't know, of course, but, when you think about it, it's a story that isn't much different than Jesus' own.

Perhaps there's a reason for this. The parallels between Jesus' last hours and those of Stephen are striking. The situations were similar with false charges, along with manipulated and distorted evidence. Both Jesus and Stephen were brought to their deaths through mob violence. Both lives ended before their natural time and in dishonorable fashion—as blasphemers condemned to death. In the moment, according to the public record, they would have brought humiliating shame to their families and broken the hearts of their mothers. Yet, as I said, public judgment is often poor judgment.

Both Jesus and Stephen had families and close friends who loved them dearly. They would have been judged quite differently than what was known about them by public opinion. That's what love does. It allows us to know a person and put things into perspective—to look beyond the public shame and redemptively into the heart of the one condemned. At the time of their deaths, the only ones who considered Stephen and Jesus heroes of goodness and martyrs to the divine mission were those who knew and loved them. Everyone else viewed them as criminals. Only those who knew and loved them saw the true person in each situation. No one else would have given either Stephen or Jesus the benefit of the doubt. The ill-informed public would merely go along with mob justice and its verdict—that these two deserved their fate—one by crucifixion, the other by stoning—however wrong and unjust those judgments were. So, who is right about those who are accused of wrong? If there is something in a person that contradicts their public condemnation, why does this not hold the weight of truth? Why is this not worth holding onto?

When the lives and scandalous deaths of Jesus and Stephen were brought forward in time, love is what redeemed their lives. Think about it.

The public record would have remained as it was cast. Their stories became revelatory, heroic, honorable, and noble, because of the love of those who knew them quite differently. Their deaths were redeemed by their lives and who they truly were—something that only those who loved them knew and shared. Frankly, without such love, it's possible to this day no one would know of them or view Jesus as the presence of God. The love that held onto the meaning of these two lives is what redeemed them from the public shame. They would be known for good, not evil, even though they died condemned.

Such love is what gives us, generations later, a glimpse of divine love and grace. God knows every one of us and understands our true selves, even more than our own mother; yet, like a mother's love, God will not let us go, even when we have broken the hearts of those who love us. That love, like a mother's love, comes because we are born from God. It is a primal relationship, just like a mother's. With a mother's love, God holds onto the hope of each person's redemption—even those condemned to death by public judgment.

What breaks the heart of God is if we are unwilling to receive such love, or offer it to another. To heaven, grace has more meaning and effect than it is ever given a chance to have on earth. If we humans could be as quick to love as to condemn—to restore, as to punish, we just might discover that redemptive love has more impact on healing broken hearts, broken families, broken communities, and our broken world than does self-righteous hate.

When a child breaks your heart, only a mother knows the heart of the one that was beating within her from the beginning. She alone understands the value of a life. This reflects the love that God has for every person,

regardless of what they have done. It's the most primal love we know as humans. And it's the reason we consider it redemptive and why it is truly divine.

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