

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Way of Love

Recovering the Heart of Christianity

by

Norman Wirzba

THE RIGHT MEASURE OF FAITH

1. “Without [God, life, and love] *together*, everything falls apart. That is the heart of Christianity” (p. 2). What is at stake in keeping “God, life, and love” together? What happens if one or more are neglected—or lost altogether? Why do you think Norman Wirzba says this is the “heart” of the Christian faith?
2. Read the story of Oscar Romero that Wirzba recounts on pp. 4–6. What can this story teach us about the nature of love? Why is it that engaging with stories, rather than memorizing formulas or reading textbooks, is the best way to train others in the way of love?

3. “Christian faith is really one long apprenticeship in which we work to understand and then root out the many ways we devise for falsifying or simply denying love. It is the tradition of practice in which people refine the sympathies and the skills that enable an honest and complex embrace of the world” (p. 8). Is this how you were taught to view Christianity? Why or why not?

LOVE LESSONS

1. “Many people have no problem affirming the idea that love is at the center of what gives life meaning and satisfaction. But that does not mean they then take the next logical step and dedicate time to learning how to love” (p. 11). How have you dedicated time to this?
2. What would it look like for the Church to “be inspired and moved by Christianity’s heart” (p. 17)? What would have to change? What could stay the same?
3. “Church is the place where people come together to be inspired and taught by the love of God to act lovingly with each other and the whole world” (p. 21). Do you view your own faith community in this way? Why or why not?

THE DRAMA OF LOVE

1. When have you understood your life through the “lens of love” (p. 34)? When have you failed to do so? What difference does this lens make?
2. Wirzba describes a popular four-part narrative that Christians have often used to summarize “the core movements of their faith story”: creation, fall, salvation, and heaven (p. 40). Is this the narrative you learned when you first came to faith? What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses?
3. Wirzba then proposes a new four-part narrative that displays “how the love of God or its rejection or distortion is at work in each movement”: creation, fall, redemption, and hope (p. 40). If this became the most popular narrative, what impact would that have on how Christians think, speak, and act?

WHEN LOVE BECOMES FLESH, LIFE IS CREATED

1. When thinking about Christian teaching on creation, it is “not enough to say that God got it all going a long, long time ago. What needs stressing is the realization that creation is the temporal embodiment of God’s eternal love” (p. 49). What do you make of Wirzba’s claim here about creation? How might this claim enlarge and enrich your own understanding?
2. “The Bible shows little interest in the scientific mechanisms that can be thought to have brought the

universe into being. The important question is not, ‘How did the world originate?’ but ‘Why does anything exist at all and for what purpose?’” (p. 49). How might a shift from this first question to the second change how you read and interpret the story of creation in Genesis?

3. “[Christians] have [often] sought a supposed bliss in some ethereal heaven and thus presupposed that salvation means something like an escape from this world” (p. 56). Why is this view of salvation so popular? When you consider Christians who hold this view, how would you characterize their relationship with the created, material world?

CREATION GARDEN STYLE

1. “If you want to know the meaning of life [and] what God’s creating love actually looks like, one of the best places to go is to a garden” (p. 61). Before reading this chapter, had you ever considered the relationship between Christianity and gardening? Why or why not?
2. In this chapter, Wirzba tells the backstory of the Lord’s Acre, a community garden in western North Carolina (pp. 66–71). How does this story display the power and importance of gardening? What does it teach us about food, community, and God?
3. “The God who creates is—like a gardener—fully present to the world and committed to be with it daily,

nurturing and leading it into the fullness of life” (p. 72). What would it look like if the Church embraced this idea of God as the Gardener who, out of love, creates and sustains all of creation? What would have to change? What could stay the same?

THE FEAST OF CREATION: ON LEARNING HOSPITALITY

1. In this chapter, Wirzba offers a unique reading of the story of Noah (pp. 79–82). For example, he writes, “What if the ark is not an escape vessel, but a school for the learning of compassion and delight? And what if the work Noah is about to do is an apprenticeship in the ways of God’s love?” (p. 80). What might Wirzba’s reading of this popular biblical story teach us about hospitality?
2. Wirzba notes that “few of us have learned the skill of paying attention” (p. 87). How would you assess your current ability to appreciate the “many miracles” around you each day? How could you do a better job of this?
3. “To practice Sabbath is to rest. More exactly, it is to participate in God’s resting in the world.... Narrated this way, Sabbath rest is not about stopping, but about exchanging our restlessness for delight” (pp. 89–90). Have you ever considered Sabbath as participating in “God’s resting in the world”? What might it change about how you practice Sabbath, if you do?

WHEN LOVE FAILS, LIFE FALLS APART

1. “If love is the optic that enables people to recognize in each other the gracious and precious character of life, then sin is a form of blindness that causes people to misperceive and mistake the world” (p. 97). What contemporary examples of this “blindness” come to mind?
2. Wirzba recounts the story of the stage play and then film *August: Osage County* (pp. 100–3). What can this painful story teach us about the perversion of love and its negative impact on human relationships?
3. The concept of “original sin” is a contested one within Christianity, both throughout history and today (pp. 103–8). How were you taught to think about “original sin”? What is at stake in this debate—especially as it relates to love?

FROM INTIMACY TO IDOLATRY: THE ORIGINS OF SIN

1. “How does a human heart become sick, and what are the patterns of desire and behavior that lead people into degrading and destructive forms of life?” (p. 110). How would you summarize Wirzba’s answer to this question? What do you make of his answer?
2. “The crucial element in idolatry is the installation of anything as a savior or solution to our problems” (p. 122). What idols are present in American culture? What idols are present in your own life?

3. According to Wirzba, what do idolatry, deformed love, and eating have in common (pp. 124–27)? How does this connection make you think differently about the food you eat?

THE WIDE REACH OF SIN

1. “The reach and the effects of sin have never been confined to the human realm.... [T]he relationships we have with places, neighborhoods, and non-human creatures ... will eventually be twisted and mangled because of sin” (p. 129). Have you ever considered the effects of sin beyond “the human realm”? Why or why not?
2. “Sin produces in people habits of inattention and negligence, so that they can move through a wounded world oblivious to their responsibility for it” (p. 134). How could you become more attentive to your responsibility to be hospitable to all of creation?
3. Wirzba cites the example of coal mining in Appalachia to illustrate how often we humans have failed to live among creatures in ways that display humility and respect. What can we learn from this specific example?

WHEN LOVE GOES TO WORK, LIFE IS HEALED

1. “To be healthy ... is to be able to move freely, sympathetically, and shamelessly among others.... In Christian parlance, the name for the wholeness and joy

of a healed life is *salvation*” (p. 146). What do you make of Wirzba’s description of—and link between—health and salvation? How does your own description of these concepts compare to his?

2. On pages 147–51, Wirzba tells the story of Mark, his friend and colleague. What can we learn about healing from this story?
3. “Jesus is proclaimed to be the savior of the world not because he plucks people out of this world—as if to relocate them in some ethereal, disembodied heaven—but because he performs the healing that enables them to experience life abundantly here and now” (p. 152). Does this claim challenge your view of Jesus? If so, how?

THE COMMUNAL CONTEXTS OF HEALTH

1. Have you ever stopped to consider all of those individuals—human and not—who have made you who you are today (see p. 159)? If not, what would it look like to do so?
2. “Prayer is the regular action that opens people to others and to God” (p. 162). What role does prayer play in your life? Have you experienced this effect of prayer?
3. “Baptism signifies a person’s cleansing and entrance into community, and the Eucharist is the regular meal that nurtures people in the ways of love. Think of these ritual practices as learning exercises or apprenticeship disciplines in the school of love” (p. 177). What roles

do baptism and the Eucharist play in your faith community? How would you describe the impact that these two “ritual practices” have had in your own formation?

LOVE CREATES A NEW WORLD

1. “There is more than enough pain and suffering in this world to make us want to give up on love.... Love is a good idea, and it’s nice when it happens in limited contexts from time to time, but we shouldn’t expect it to have much impact in a violent world” (pp. 183–84). Have you ever felt this way? How have you made sense of and moved on from those feelings?
2. Read Maggy’s story starting on page 184. What can we learn? How might the imagination that love creates in you prompt you, like Maggy, to support the flourishing of others?
3. “[Maggy’s] task is not to ‘save’ the world or even all the children of Burundi. It is to bear witness to the love of God. If the love of God is forgotten, the noble intentions of people to save others will become destructive, because the desire for power will overrun the desire to help” (pp. 195–96). How can you keep your “noble intentions” to help others from being compromised by “the desire for power”? How might remembering the love of God help in that regard?

WHEN LOVE IS ALL IN ALL, LIFE IS HEAVEN

1. Wirzba calls heaven a dangerous idea for two reasons: first, “it can serve as a conceptual club that divides people into the damned and the saved” and, second, “it can function as an idea that promotes *escape* from the hard realities of this life” (p. 201). Have you ever thought about or discussed heaven with others in these ways? If so, what examples come to mind?
2. Wirzba suggests that heaven can be characterized as “the love of God becoming fully active in the lives of all creatures” (p. 204). Before reading this chapter, had you ever considered heaven in this way? How might this perspective challenge how you think about heaven?
3. “Body-soul dualism is a profoundly anti-Christian teaching, because it pronounces evil and despicable what God has made good. No Christian should denounce bodies, because each body is God’s love made visible, tactile, audible, fragrant, and nutritious” (p. 211). In your own thinking, where do you have a tendency toward this dualism? How do your family, friends, and faith community view and treat the body? How has this affected you?

THE HARMONIES OF HEAVEN

1. What can learning to live in harmony with others teach us about being “the ‘body of Jesus Christ,’ that unique, social, singing body called by God to witness to God’s

continuing saving and redeeming presence on earth” (p. 227)?

- Wirzba writes that “it is not *where we are* but *how we are wherever we are* that determines one’s entrance into heaven” (p. 229). What does he mean? What is at stake in the distinction he is making?
- “What Revelation describes is a world that has been wounded but is now healed, because it is in direct communication with the life-giving power of God. All people from every corner of the world have gathered together and share in the nurturing, refreshing fruit that God provides” (p. 231). Is this how you think of the world described in the book of Revelation? Why or why not?

EPILOGUE / FINAL QUESTION

- “In and through and for love, God creates a hospitable world and then invites each person to join in the welcome, nurture, and celebration of everyone and everything” (p. 236). How might you accept this invitation? How has reading this book affected your view of the nature of Christianity? What might it challenge you to think further about, or take action toward?