

CHAPTER 1

THE BELOVED

THE ONE THING THAT DEFINES US

I pushed open the front door and pulled my coat off, stomping the winter slush from my good leather boots. As my hand came out of the coat sleeve, I could feel the stiff plastic bracelet chafe against my wrist. I can never get those things off. When I first started wearing them at the hospital years ago, they were made of sturdy paper. Now, in the age of hyper-security around patient identification, you either need to be Houdini to slip out of one or have the plastic band cut off.

I walked to the kitchen where I keep the scissors and snipped the patient ID bracelet in half between my name, birthday, and the barcode. Before I pitched the bracelet in the bin, I reminded myself: *this* does not define me.

When scanned by hospital personnel, that plastic band reveals that I belong to the cancer club. If you want to know all the gory details of a middle-aged woman who has survived breast cancer after more than twenty years, just scan that bar code. My medical charts note I've had hip replacements, ankle surgery, vertigo, seasonal allergies, and multiple biopsies. I've struggled with my weight, I've never smoked, and I drink wine regularly. It's all there.

Every physician, nurse, or dentist I've ever met wants to know the cancer story up front. They do the math in their heads—calculating the years between my diagnosis and now. Sometimes I see them wince. Back then I was thirty-six years old, a wife, and a mom of three young children. Fortunately for me, it was caught early. My long-term survivorship and cure is a testament to early intervention, care at a top Boston hospital, and if you ask me, the power of prayer.

After months of exams and multiple surgeries, ultimately, my cancer was declared noninvasive. It did not spread. Yet absolutely *everything else* about becoming a cancer patient *was* invasive, in terms of its impact on my life. Years later, it still is.

Despite an exceptionally full post-cancer life, my original diagnosis never fades from view. For the medical community, it is always their foremost concern. My medical history defines me before they enter the exam room. Yet that little white ID band does not tell the whole story of who I am or what is most important to know about me.

That cancer diagnosis may have been the worst thing that's ever happened to me.

And, you know, we've all got a worst thing. We've all got stuff that we can point to that is the worst—the hurts, the failures, the deaths, the pains, the suffering, the mistakes, the wrongs. Some Catholics call them crosses to bear.

Yet this isn't going to be a book about the negatives in my life. Ultimately, this is about the greatest things, which have gotten me through the worst and are leading me to the best.

BELONGING

More than any other single factor in my life, my belonging to Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church has had the greatest impact on me. Faith gives meaning to everything in my life. It is new eyes to see the world in all its difficulties,

or rather, to see *through* all the difficulties with hope as I cling to grace.

Belonging defines me and refines me. Where and in whom I place my trust matters.

Even though I may not always feel like a confident person and I fail and flail on a regular basis, my own frailties do not undermine my confidence in my faith. They provide a catalyst to turn to my faith and to place my trust and hope in the eternal truth and goodness of a God who loves me. God came to save and redeem every frailty, every weakness, every sin, and every broken heart.

That's the first confidence that the Catholic Church offers us: God exists.

And we'll explore a few more: God is real, he loves you, and he invites you to be in his family forever.

My life with Jesus and my confidence in his Church are so much bigger than my medical history. They are even more powerful than my family history, more significant than my work history, and I'm relieved to admit, far greater than my sinful history. My personal history is wrapped up in God's history—his-story, if you will. His-story makes all the difference in mine. My life and yours have great meaning in the arc of eternity.

After fifty-plus years of Catholic life, I've found confidence and hope to be good traveling companions. So may I ask you, dear reader, to offer a little confidence and hope in the journey we'll make in the pages to come? And if you choose to offer a little prayer for this author, while we are engaged here, I wouldn't mind a bit.

CONFIDENCE IN THE BELOVED

I grew up in a churchgoing family. I was taught about God, learned my prayers, and received the sacraments when it was appropriate to do so. I attended Catholic schools, and in sixth grade I made my Confirmation. In the years after

my Confirmation, something started to stir within me, spiritually speaking.

Hiking and backpacking highlighted my young teen years; I will never forget standing on a high outcropping of rock and looking out over the Blue Ridge Mountains for the first time. The majesty of that vista touched my girl's heart. Somehow I *knew* that God was with me in that moment of intoxicating beauty. It was as if God broke through the veneer of all my "knowledge" of him that I had been taught and was encountering me. God was somehow talking to me.

I heard no voices, but in that moment, I came to believe that God exists. It was the moment when I began to understand in experience what others had told me about—that God created everything out of love.

That moment seemed timeless. As if time stood still, I became absorbed into something larger than myself. I was connected to it; I participated in it. It was exactly this participation in a thing so beautiful, so totally beyond my own being, that made me ask, Who made such a thing? And I knew who.

God was drawing me toward him by appealing to what was beautiful to my mind and heart. For God is true beauty.

Looking back, that trip planted the seeds for a deeper relationship with God, but the field was plowed by my upbringing. Yet my first mature encounter with God that I can recall was not found in a book or in a church. My first memorable contact with God was in nature. God's beauty in creation won me over—long before I understood the Bible, sacraments, doctrine, or Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Today, I experience all those things as well and am equally awed and inspired by them. But for me, God first used natural beauty to lead me. My heart remembers that every day.

I've since learned to pause and breathe deeply when wonder and awe strike me. It's usually a sign that God's love is somehow at work.

In ensuing years, experiences of beauty kept pointing me to God. While I was climbing trails in the Colorado Rockies, a similar dazzling beauty overtook me. I've also been mesmerized by oceans. The highlight of one recent vacation happened while snorkeling in a coral reef. I came face-to-face with a sea turtle while being surrounded by schools of blue and yellow tangs. Yet none of these beauties of creation captivated my heart like the hours I have spent looking deeply into the eyes of my newborn child. As a mother, I have spent many such moments gazing into the eyes of a tiny soul looking back at me. In all of these encounters, I experienced beauty of a transcendent kind. These amazing wonders could have their existence only in God as a Creator—a proof to me of God's existence.

My mountaintop experiences with God as a teen taught me experientially what the Bible reveals: "For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (Ws 13:5). I was discovering what the Catholic Church had long held, that God "can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason" (CCC, 36).

My local parish community became the place where the seeds of my young faith in God took root. During my teen years I met those believers I told you about—the joyful ones who really knew God—at a prayer group in my church. They became conduits of God's love for me. They were passionate about being Catholic and excited for me to know God, too. Like people in love, they couldn't help but speak of their beloved. Pope Francis, it seems, would agree: "What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known?"¹

These were confident Catholics I was meeting. They spoke of Jesus with open love of him. It was almost a little

embarrassing. I felt I had some pretty good head-knowledge about God but not much heart-knowledge. I knew things *about* God, but I did not *know* God personally. Their passion for Christ was intriguing.

When I was sixteen, I attended a teen retreat weekend held in our parish school. On retreat, we heard talks and songs about the love of Jesus, something I had heard about from those nice folks at the prayer meetings. After lunch we were encouraged to take some quiet time to be alone with God. I found myself walking outside to the ball fields where I had once played church-sponsored softball. I sat on the familiar dugout bench. I had a pocket-sized New Testament next to me given to me by the retreat staff.

I don't remember if I tried to pray or not, but what I remember is that I opened the Bible to a random page. And *whoa*—it was the God-of-the-mountain speaking directly to me:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all that we ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3:14–21)

The words on the page were alive! In those moments, I found the love that surpasses knowledge. *Zing!* Straight to the heart! There was a stirring inside me, filling me up to know *the breadth, length, height, and depth* of Christ's love for me.

God was there on that bench, the same God from the mountain. I experienced God's fullness that day. And I've been changed by that love ever since. I walked back into that retreat with a new awareness of the realness of God. He knew me. And I *knew* it. I had met the Beloved.

Accepting Jesus' personal love for me defined me. I discovered the honest-to-goodness truth about myself as one who is beloved. I belonged to the Beloved. I belonged to God.

Being beloved is belonging. It is the fruit, the happy fallout, of love. We can't "belove" ourselves. Belovedness is always bestowed as a gift from another.

Can we love ourselves? Yes. Loving ourselves and caring for our well-being are good and noble things. But we are not meant for isolation, we were made for relationships and connection with others. More specifically, we were made for family and made for communion—a big word that evokes deep, intimate contact with another, a beloved one. It also is a deep connectedness with others.

We are designed to be beloved. We know this on a human level. We may have experience being beloved of a parent or grandparent or in a romantic relationship. But we are designed to experience it also on a spiritual level.

We are called to be in a relationship with the true Beloved, Jesus. That's not something we dreamed up on our own. It's not myth or fantasy or wishful thinking. It is God's plan from before the beginning of time. God has always been the initiator when it comes to having relationships with human persons.

GOD LOVED US FIRST

We see God's initiative all through history as we read the Bible. God creates the world and makes human beings—and slowly reveals himself to them, inviting them to know him. Yet that history is fraught with human beings messing things up, not trusting God.

There are so many examples where God initiates powerful and trustworthy relationships, where God is faithful, but the people he chooses are faithful only some of the time and faithless or forgetful at other times. Covenants between God and humans were made and often broken. Yet the breaking part was never God's fault.

God called Abraham, God called Moses, and God called David. All of these great ones sinned. They did not get everything right. Yet God still loved them and had a plan for their lives for their good and the good of others. God patiently loved.

God later called Mary, who accepted the role to become the woman whereby the greatest promise of all would come to pass. God the Son, Jesus, would take on a human body through her, and he would be born to save people from their sins.

Jesus—God's Son and Mary's son—became the perfect man, who finally showed us how to have a relationship with God the Father in heaven, and Jesus traded his life for ours so that we could be free from sins that held us back from God. Jesus made a way for us to live forever with God. In him, all could be united with the God of love.

“‘God is Love’ and love is his first gift, containing all others” (CCC, 733).

I think of it like this: God created us and promptly fell in love with his creatures. It is not a gooey, heartsick, or sappy kind of love. God desires this union and intimacy with us to bring us everlasting happiness. Since we humans kept messing up our side of the relationship, eventually, God came in person to seal the deal. Jesus came to

show us how to live and how to be in a proper relationship with God the Father, the benevolent Creator who created everything and everyone out of love.

God still calls to us today. He often uses other people—especially the people of the Church, such as those who taught me about the faith to prepare my heart, and especially those I met at the retreat when I was older—to point us toward being open to a relationship with God.

God's love for us is a gift. God's love sent Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life for us. And through Jesus Christ, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is guiding the Catholic Church. Through the Church, we have the gift of the Bible and the gifts of the sacraments, and all the graces that God makes available through them, so we can know this truth: God loves us.

God loves you.

God loves me.

It sounds simple, though it's not simplistic. It's profound.

God *is* love.

That's one of the most quoted lines from the Bible, and it's one of the pithiest messages in the world. So much so that it's the stuff of posters, T-shirts, and refrigerator magnets. But do you know who first wrote it? John—an apostle of Jesus and a member of the Early Church. He was one of Jesus' closest friends. John's nickname is "the beloved disciple." The rest of the quotation comes from a letter John wrote to his beloved friends:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. . . .

God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been

perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love, because he first loved us. (1 Jn 4:7, 15–19, emphasis mine)

God loved us first. That's the starting point for our confidence and hope.

I find it fantastic that the God of the entire universe—the same God who was paying attention to little ole me on the mountain and on the dugout bench—waits for our personal RSVP. God desires us to return that love in freedom, to choose him. And beyond choosing him, he sends us to love others, allowing our love for him to be expressed by loving them.

As I got older and read the Bible with more fervor, I came across a special phrase from Jesus, captured in the beloved disciple's gospel. When I read it, I remember that day on the mountain and that afternoon on the bench.

Jesus said to his friends, "You did not choose me but I chose you" (Jn 15:16). It was Jesus who chose me first. It was always God's initiative. He was waiting for me to choose him—to grow in that relationship with him, like John and Paul, and to become a beloved friend of God, another beloved disciple.

Something else happened to me that day on the bench with God. The people on that retreat and in that church became a family to me. I experienced a connectedness—a belonging—that I had never understood before. I was no longer a casual church member taking up a seat in the pew at church like strangers taking seats in a theater. I belonged. I was part of the community. God's love connected me to every person in that church. It didn't matter whether I liked them or not. What mattered was that God loved them, too.

It was staggering to learn I belonged to something that was much bigger than my little, local church. I was eternally connected to all those believers from throughout history.

St. Paul wrote that God chose us before the world began, that God was thinking of us and dreaming of us before we ever had a clue of his existence: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ . . . just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. . . . He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Eph 1:3–6). God the Father that comes through the Beloved Son, Jesus.

It’s no coincidence that, throughout the New Testament, the apostles who first loved Jesus called the Early Church members “beloved.” Scan the Early Church letters of Peter, Paul, John, James, and Jude, and you’ll find this norm. The apostles addressed the followers of Jesus as “beloved.” For that is what they were! They were beloved to Christ and therefore to one another.

HOPE IN THE CROSS OF THE BELOVED

It is inspiring to consider that the Beloved, in order to make us beloved, went to the Cross for the sake of love for us. The Bible and the Church teach that Jesus Christ suffered his passion and death on the Cross in atonement for all the sins that had befallen humanity—both before his death and since. That means that Jesus died for you and me.

It is no small thing that Catholics are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and marked with the Sign of the Cross. It is at once consoling and slightly ominous when you consider the history the cross has as an instrument for torture and hideous public executions carried out by the ancient Roman government.

The worst criminals were sentenced to be tortured and to hang on a cross to die.

Thanks to the merits of Jesus on the Cross, we have gained so much by his death and resurrection. We have the forgiveness of our sins and the graces of all the sacraments of the Church to benefit us. In and through Christ's resurrection, the Cross has become a true sign of hope and salvation for all people.

When you get right down to it, for our sakes, the Cross is not a negative. It's a plus. Jesus turned something that was excruciating and despicable into something powerfully redemptive.

When I see a cross, or a crucifix with the body of Jesus on it, in my mind I see the death of Jesus, the Son of God, who died there. But with the eyes of faith I see also the victorious side, the plus side. (Maybe I'm crazy, but even the shape of the cross reminds me of a plus sign!) Through something God-awful came something God-inspired.

Since we are called to imitate the Beloved, we too must embrace the Cross in whatever form it takes in our lives. My medical history has been a kind of cross for me for more than twenty years. For you it might be something else. Some crosses, trials, or burdens are short-lived, and some are prolonged.

Our crosses are never overlooked or unseen by the Beloved. This is the God who sees us, knows us—even young girls on mountaintops or ball-field benches. For me, today, God is also the Lord of the pathology lab and the operating table. He can and will accompany us in our worst times if we invite him. Our crosses are not losses when we are joined to Jesus Christ. Even the cruelest crosses that lead to death, when joined to our Beloved, lead to life eternal. That is the hope of the Cross.

Ultimately, God used the Cross of Christ for our good. The same holds for whatever crosses we may struggle with: God can bring something good out of something

difficult with his grace. Grace is another way of saying his love can become our divine aid and strength when we need it most.

Over time, I've learned to see the shape of the cross as a symbolic summary of my life—not a negative but a plus. I wonder if this little word picture might be helpful for you as well.

A cross contains both a vertical beam and a horizontal one, and it represents all the relationships in my life. I imagine the vertical beam representing my life between God and me. I visualize God reaching from heaven to earth to invite me to into a relationship and me replying to that in prayer. That vertical dimension is a two-way street. God initiates, and I respond. It also includes the sacrifice that Jesus made for me on the Cross. God came from heaven, took flesh in order to redeem the flesh of a fallen humanity, and raised it up! To thank Jesus for that, I respond to his love for me with my love for him. I pray daily, I go to Sunday Mass, and I find ways to adore and serve Jesus, the Beloved, every day.

I imagine the horizontal beam of the cross as representing my relationships here on earth. Like Jesus' two arms stretched on the Cross, my own arms are meant to stretch to love and embrace others. I respond to the Beloved also by loving the people he has placed in my life: my family, my church, my community. I love them because God first loved me. I have the strength to love them because of the graces God gives me through his love and through the Church.

The vertical and the horizontal parts of my life meet and make sense in Jesus and in the faith that has been passed on to me through the Catholic Church.

I wear a little cross of gold around my neck because, as a Catholic, my life is *both* spiritual *and* religious. I am *both* prayerful interiorly *and*, on the exterior, a practicing Church member trying to live the faith out in the world.