

The Medicine of Faith
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A man asked me to see him as *both pastor and psychotherapist*. On the happiest day of his life he had married the only woman he had ever had a relationship with other than a prostitute and he was now in the throes of grief over his wife's interest in a younger man she had met in a bar. A deep river of unexpressed anguish and self-doubt, was carrying him back into the belly of unbelovedness. He was a brilliant man who rarely showed his feelings. Marriage counseling had proved unsuccessful.

Sitting quietly together in my study, he seemed numb, folded up within himself, his painful plight stored way down inside where he had kept his most precious emotional belongings all his life since he was a boy. I felt within me the poverty of anything I could say to comfort him. He needed more than clinical acumen or even the empathy and kindness of a pastor. Something in him had realized this. He had been quite explicit in scheduling the consultation: *I want to see you as both pastor and psychotherapist*. After a few minutes I invited him to read Psalm 51 out loud.

He didn't get far before the ancient words elicited an outpouring of feelings rushing forth in an avalanche of great heaving sobs. He described to me later how after leaving my office, he got lost on the way home, drunk with feeling. His whole life changed after that. He attended church regularly (which he had never done before!) and after moving out of state kept in contact with me for several years.

I've often remembered that encounter over the years whenever the subject of "integration of theology and psychotherapy" comes up. It was one of the defining moments which reinforced for me what St. Basil had observed many years before, that the Church is a *hospital* and the priests are *psychotherapists*. As for integration of theology and psychology? That occurred even before the creation of the life. According to St. John, everything flowed from the heart of the "only begotten son of God" through whom all things were made; the one who is the "light and the life" of humankind. What is joined together in Christ, let no one cut asunder!

I am increasingly convinced that whatever else it appears to be at times, *pastoral* psychotherapy involves a clear focus on the fundamental *belovedness* of persons which stems from our relationship to God. God is the healer. Faith is the guide. If not a servant of this context, emphasis on pathological diagnosis and subsequent attempts to "cure" too easily shift the ground subtly away from the Source and back again to the must-becomedness of our own helpless attempts to fix what we perceive is broken. Since it is exactly our lack of belovedness that is the root cause of suffering, psychotherapy that proceeds outside the context of authentic religious faith easily becomes an iatrogenically induced contributor to the problem it attempts to solve.

What I mean is that religious faith is our primary psychotherapy and the consulting room is life itself. There is no such thing as brief therapy. There is only the therapy that occurs over a lifetime and is completed in the mystery of the

soul's final reckoning at death. Anything less doesn't deserve the name. We are changed in the embrace of love over a lifetime and not as is so often the case elsewhere, by spending a lifetime seeking to change in order to be embraced by love. Every so often, we are witnesses of the miracles that are wrought.

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