

Does this not remind us of John the Baptist's attitude, pointing disciples to Jesus Christ, saying: "Behold, the Lamb of God" (John 1,29)? And: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (3,30).

And: "He, who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (John 1,27). Indeed, there is a clear reference to this last verse in the icon, because Jesus Christ is portrayed wearing sandals.

What does it mean, today, to be witnesses of the light of Jesus Christ? It means to learn from Mary and John: they are not in the foreground, and their role is basically to point towards Jesus Christ, whom they themselves are contemplating.

The Assembly in Sibiu clearly suffered from the difficult ecumenical climate of recent years. The Sibiu icon was there, in the Assembly tent, to remind us of the right attitude, of the humility of witnesses.

It was and remains a challenge for all of us to take a step back, whichever church we belong to, to decrease so that Jesus Christ, the true light, will increase and His light will reach all human beings.

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Daniel PASTIRČÁK

A Story about Love

Imagine, if you will, a sandy plain, shards of mirror in the sand, and fragments of a face in the bits of mirror. You see before you the soul of the man of this story. Days were the sand, whirled up and dropped down by the wind. Fragments of thoughts were the mirror; thoughts that the man cannot collect and in their mosaic he is unable to see his own face.

Largest, however, was the space, the vast emptiness above the sand and the splinters. The space was the loneliness of the man. It stretched up and away and filled everything. "I want to know real love," said the man. "I want someone just for myself."

The One-above-Him, who had created the man, placed him on the land, and knew and loved him, said: "Come and I will teach you."

So the man went, in order to learn and know. Thus, he came to a poor village beneath a poor church, and, finally, the poorest house in the village. Out of an earthen yard, onto a road between decayed fences, people were carrying a timber coffin.

In the dismal, gray light of morning, the church bells knelled the death. The father lay in the coffin, and the daughter walked behind. This burial was, for her, a burial of everything, since the toothless gravedigger had claimed her entire family.

"Love her," said the One-above-Him.

"Both of you will die of starvation," thundered the shadow that had been following him from the beginning.

"Love her," repeated the One-above-Him. "The toothless gravedigger will guffaw in a leaden morning, and the bells will ring as today, but they will be ringing for your funeral," whispered the shadow.

"I want to love her," said the man.

As the solemn group returned, he offered the girl his arm. A curtain of tears and a veil of pain isolated her from the road on which she was walking, as well as from the man's arm on which she was leaning. Thus, she remained distant and unaffected. Her face, resembling a

peach flower's petal in the midst of a night of ebony hair, was as inaccessible as the white, slumbering moon.

"Be my wife," he uttered as the fire flared up in the earthen chest of the stove, and he joined her for a cup of linden tea. She gazed as if in a trance. "Be my wife," he repeated.

"I will be," she consented absentmindedly, "but wait until my grief ceases."

So, he waited. He worked, cutting down timber for the landlord in the nearby forest. He squared the timber that the landlord had granted him, and in his hands the little hovel was transformed into a house of joy.

"The fire burning inside me: that must be love," he thought.

"You love her because she is beautiful," grinned the shadow at him one evening.

His wife was already quietly sleeping. The man, however, was awake, watching wild bodies of flames battling with each other in the cavern behind the stove's grate. "I will love her even if her beauty fades away."

In the morning, a moan woke him. His beautiful wife was writhing with cramps, and her open eyes glowed, bright with fever. Following the villager's advice, the man brought an old monk to his wife's bedside.

"Only God can save her," muttered the old man.

"Let her live!" cried out the man to the One-above-Him. "I will love her no matter what happens. I will stand by her until my death. I want to learn from you."

The days passed through him, rusted carriages full of flames. In this fire, he was losing her; in this fire, he was losing himself. Slowly, the carriages, full of raving, and the carts, full of moaning and fever, rolled away and left her ruined like a desert or a land burned by war. Her complexion, once soft, smooth and fresh, was now sallow and the peach flower transformed into gray paraffin.

"I will love her in her misery," said the man.

The days passed. The love of the woman, like a mirror, reflected the man's faithfulness.

"I want to be your slave," she would say to him. She would squat at his feet and, with scrutiny, watch for the mere flash of a wish in his eyes.

"It is easy to love a devoted slave," the shadow whispered when the man was standing alone in the summer garden, the sky full of stars.

"Even if she does not serve me, or even if she dishonours me, I will

love her. The One-above-Me gave me a sign: a star, shining equally on everyone, the healthy and the sick, the beautiful and the hideous, the devoted and the unfaithful."

In the stone room, beneath the candlelight, the man found the loyal body afflicted by a stroke, motionless and helpless.

"Lord, give me strength to persevere," he cried out to the One-above-Him.

The sickness spread as a bush grows to the river. Behind the gates of months, everything that made her human abandoned her. Her lips, paralyzed, mouthed soundless moans; her fingers froze in statuesque gestures; and her lifeless eyes gazed out into nowhere. She could not speak, see, hear, or move, yet was alive. Now, he became the slave. He served her body, though it barely held any signs of life.

"This is love. This is faithfulness," people murmured.

"This is not love. This is pride," the shadow caught him one autumn day in the alley that sloped downhill from the church.

The man's head was wreathed in wet tatters of mist. "What is love?" he implored and raised his eyes to the slate silence of the clouds as if he could see the One-who-is-above-everything. "I do not know... I do not understand..."

"You will be invisible," he heard in response. "You will serve and no one will be able to see you; you will suffer and no one will feel sorry for you; you will give up your life and no one will say: *Thank you.*"

So, he returned home, but no footprints on the road revealed his passing. He washed her. The water coursed down the numb body, but no visible hands drew the water. He worked, cooked, and cleaned. The house was clean, filled with warmth and the smell of fresh food, but no one could be seen in the yard, or in the stable, or on the roof, or in the attic, or in the room.

"A miracle!" people exclaimed. "The Almighty, Himself, takes care of her since her unfaithful husband has abandoned her."

Another miracle happened as well. The woman recovered from her illness. As the spring grass pushes up through the wet crust of the past summers and renews the appearance of faded life, so too, did the face of the girl radiate with her old beauty.

"She is beautiful," people said, "but has nothing."

The woman thought about that also. In the marketplace one can buy sweet strawberries, juicy apples, or fruit from the countryside gardens. The beauty of a woman can also be exchanged for money.

Therefore, she smiled at, embraced, or kissed the wealthy men, who spent long weeks in a hunting lodge near the village. Her house

was soon furnished with chests and the cabinets overflowed with jewellery; silk; brocade; delicate, lace-trimmed dresses; scarlet scarves; and cashmere blouses.

“I can endure no more,” lamented the man. “It is easier to push the boulder of solitude up an endless mountain than to love a traitor.”

Disappearing among the straw bonnets of the houses, he passed earthen walls, decayed fences embroidered with ivy, and his beloved’s house. The One-above-Him found him and stopped his flight with one simple question.

“Where are you going?”

“I have done everything. She does not need me anymore. Love is beyond my strength. I am leaving in order to forget.”

“You are leaving, now, after you have neared the truth for the first time? Wait for another moment and hear my case. Listen. There was a man, at first only in my mind, created by my idea. I kneaded him from the dust and the barren earth. From the bone-white milk I blew a fragile bubble in which I hid the whole world. I wrote a book and placed it in the bubble, and into it I breathed the breeze that turned the pages in the man’s head. I wanted him to resemble me as a son resembles his father. I thought that when the time was ripe and the years reached their fullness, he would know me and know my love. He was looking for love, however, that could be owned, not anticipating that love can only be given. So, I reached my hand towards him in order to lead him. I taught him patiently and waited for him to one day understand. I saved him from starvation when he chose a poor girl. I carried him for many years, whilst despair, like a flood, deluged his whole universe. He wanted to own her and, therefore, he lost her; she dissolved like a mirage under his hand’s touch. Have you seen the wind sweeping rustling leaves from the November sky? Have you seen the rain, its bronze arrows nailing these leaves to the chilly ground into the stony jaws that grind them up, while the fragrance of decay permeates frosty air, the burial song of the leaves? Such was his life and such was his love. I was with him throughout all of this and felt the pain of his suffering. During that time, he only remembered me when he needed help. Tell me, what should I do with this man?”

“Go away and leave him.”

“You are sending me away, and, yet, you do not even recognize that you are this man. However, I will not leave. I will not forsake you. I will stay with you until the last moment, because unfaithfulness is overcome by love.”

As the words faded away, one could have heard the crystal flutes in the forest palace. The wind drove invisible wheels downhill. These were summer’s carriages, gathering withered flowers into the valley of ice, while the clowns of autumn set Bengal fires all around, announcing a new act in the continuous performance of life.

The Sun departs, and the Sun returns. The leaves fall, unite with the earth, and are born again. The earth maintains its regular breath, because in all its metamorphosis the One-Who-Stands-above-It never deserts it.

Thus, the man came back, because one cannot escape from love. Love has touched him, and one who is touched is also changed. Therefore, although he was returning to the One-Who-no-Longer-Cared-for-Him, the man walked calmly. Now, no more invisible, but still the same as years ago, he reached the wealthy house flooded with the shadows of the fall garden.

“You did not leave!” cried his beloved. It was not clear whether amazement, joy, or consternation was reflected in her beautiful, agate-like eyes.

“I am bringing you a gift,” he replied. “I have a treasure that I have owed you all of these years.”

The man began talking. In the twilight, over the flames of the silver candlestick, he drew the story of his love. The woman saw the long, wearying days labouring like exhausted horses struggling across a wasteland.

She saw the man’s heart, and she saw her own: light and darkness, love and silence, love and unfaithfulness. In fact, the man was revealing the story of the One-above-All, since love has only one source in one heart above all hearts. She laughed, drowning out her own thoughts.

“Do whatever you want,” she said curtly, “but you are not going to stay in this house. Dirty hands do not belong to fine china nor dusty feet under freshly laundered blankets.”

She knew she was harsh; however, it is hard to turn back from a path that has been taken for a long time.

When love cannot get into a house, it makes a bed in front of the door. Neither did the man leave. He built a log cabin at the edge of the forest. Cold, autumnal winds covered it with a coat of oak leaves and then with the silver of white frost.

The winter was white and taciturn. In the morning, the village was swathed in a veil of mist and, during the day, in the smoke of chimneys. In the evening, it was cloaked in the coat of twilight.

There was ringing everywhere: the glass of ice, the crystal of snow, and the hollow, old, urgent sound of the stone church's tower bell under the first stars. The spring flew down from the hillside, and the little boy of summer ran out to the meadows. He tossed the little yellow balls of dandelions into the sunny valleys, the earth, and the foliage was full of shadows.

"Come with us," the moustached squires shouted, poking their heads out of their carriages.

"Come with us," they called the woman the next summer.

The man waited. His love was now in the One-above-All, and so he remained calm.

"Take me with you," she cried to the squires after years had gone by, but the carriages passed as if she were a stranger.

One day what we have lived for years becomes imprinted in our faces. So too, did the face of the woman change. It was now the face of a proud queen instead of the face of an ordinary girl. As a result, the squires spurred the horses on while passing.

"Every cup has its bottom," one shouted at her, and the nobles sang songs, emboldened by the golden mead.

When the man brought her firewood in the fall, she was changed. Her lips were trembling and her eyes glistened with tears.

She stammered, "Forgive me...", overwrought, she began to sob uncontrollably.

He put his rough palm on her burning forehead.

"I am awful! After all these years, my heart has turned into a lifeless stone. I want to live! I want to live again. Rekindle the old fire of love inside me," she implored.

"Love is in the One-above-All," said the man.

This time the woman understood. Therefore, he saw her standing alone in the garden, where autumn wove its colourful tapestries. Therefore, he heard her crying in the night, in a corner leaning over the smoky lamp.

The past never disappears completely. One day it appears out of oblivion, and we are indicted as at the Last Judgment: witnesses against ourselves. The sea laps against the rocks for thousands of years, laving them with a swift current, and millennia change the rock into sand.

Every tear that springs from sincere repentance is stronger than the sea, and more powerful than thousands of years. Thus, her tears broke down her stony heart, and in its sand they lit the fire of new love.



She gave away the wealth of the house. She traded gold for a glimpse of joy in the children's eyes, and jewellery for a smile in the wrinkles of an old woman. The lips with which she kissed the man were fresh like a young girl's again.

Can you imagine a desert transformed into an oasis by springs of water? Can you imagine a garden full of mirrors reflecting beloved faces? If you can, then you see the soul of the man at the end of our story, because it is here that our story ends.

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