



She who truly loves

by Miroslav Volf

THE FIRST thing I saw was a tear—an unforgettable giant tear in the big brown eye of a ten-year-old girl. Then I saw tears in her mother's eyes. In these tears, just enough joy was mixed with pain to underscore the pain's severity: joy at seeing him, their three-month-old brother and son, and intense pain at having kissed him good-bye when he was just two days old; the ache that he, flesh of their flesh, was being brought to them for a brief visit by two strangers who are now his parents; the affliction of knowing that the joy of loving him as a mother and sister usually do will never be theirs.

The joy and the pain of those tears led me to a repentance of sorts. My image of mothers who place their children for adoption was not as bad as my image of the fathers involved, but it was not entirely positive either. I could not shake the feeling that there was something deficient in the act. The taint of "abandonment" marred it, an abandonment that was understandable, possibly even inescapable and certainly tragic, but abandonment nonetheless. To give one's child to another is to fail in the most proper duty of a parent: to love no matter what.

Somewhere in my mind, a famous verse from Isaiah colored the way I was reading birth mothers' actions: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isa. 49:15). A good mother, I thought, ought to be like Israel's God, absolutely unable to "give up" her child (cf. Hos. 11:8).

But a mother is not God, only a fragile human being living in a tragic world. So why think immediately of abandonment because she decides to place her child for adoption? The tears of our son's birth mother and the actions which, like a beautiful plant, were watered by those tears, suggested that my view of at least some birth mothers may be not only mistaken but

also morally flawed. I needed to repent and alter the image.

Later, as I was reflecting on those tears, I came across a passage in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. "Witness the pleasure that mothers take in loving their children. Some mothers put their infants out to nurse, and though knowing and loving them do not ask to be loved by them in return, if it be impossible to have this as well, but are content if they see them prospering; they retain their own love for them even though the children, not knowing them, cannot render them any part of what is due to a mother." The text comes from Aristotle's discussion of friendship. He employs the example to make plausible that "in its essence friendship seems to consist more in giving than receiving affection." For Aristotle, a "birth mother" manifests the kind of love characteristic of a true friend, a love exercised for that friend's sake, not for benefits gained from the relationship.

"It is hard to know that you have a child in the world, far away from you," wrote our son's birth mother in her first letter to us. It is hard because love passionately desires the presence of the beloved. And yet it was that same love that took deliberate and carefully studied steps that would lead to his absence. In a letter she wrote for him to read when he grows up, she tells him that her decision to place him for adoption was made for his own good. "I did it for you," she wrote repeatedly and added, "Some day you will understand."

She loved him for his own sake, and therefore would rather suffer his absence if he flourished than enjoy his presence if he languished; her sorrow over his avoidable languishing would overshadow her delight in his presence. For a lover, it is more blessed to give than to receive, even when giving

pierces the lover's heart. My image of birth mothers had changed: "she who does not care quite enough" has become "she who truly loves."

When we parted, a smile had replaced the tears on the face of our son's birth mother. Now it was my turn to cry. Back at home, with him in one arm and an open album she made for him in the other, I shed tears over the tragedy of her love. Despite an intense affection for our son—no, because of such affection—I thought there was something profoundly wrong about his being with us and not with her. In a good world, in a world in which the best things are not sometimes so terribly painful, he and she would delight and thrive in each other's love.

The encounter with our son's birth mother left an indelible mark not so much on my memory as on my character. She helped me articulate what it means to be a good parent. A vision of parenting that was buried under many impressions and opinions emerged clearly on the horizon of my consciousness. I ought to love him the way she loved him, for his own sake, not for mine. I must not pervert my love into possession.

I can hold onto him only if I let go of him.

But how can I let go of him whom I long so intensely to hold? The only way I know is by placing him in the arms of the same God from whom we received him. I remembered another deeply pained woman—a woman who suffered not so much because she had to give away her child but because, like my wife and me, she needed a miracle to receive a child. It was Hannah, the mother of Samuel. She was given the child she so desperately desired because she was willing to let go of him (1 Sam. 1:11).

Even those of us who will not set our children "before God as Nazirites," as Hannah did, will love them best if we hold them—in God's arms.

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Miroslav Volf was recently named Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School.

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