

A welcomed retreat with one of the most tender, vulnerable, human spiritual masters of our time. An inspirational and transformative read.

SR. HELEN PREJEAN, CSJ, *Ministry Against the Death Penalty*

Pick up this book and let it guide you to reflect on the questions of your life and the choices ahead. I was enriched by the journey into solitude (not loneliness), gratitude (not resentment), love (not fear). Through reading, journaling, and just plain savoring the message of our lives, the authors lead us through Henri Nouwen's writings to author our own lives in vibrant ways. The message in the end is that the world is hungry for us as we weave the community we hunger for.

SIMONE CAMPBELL, SSS

A spiritual retreat from one of the twentieth century's greatest spiritual masters.

JAMES MARTIN, SJ, *author of Learning to Pray*

This is Nouwen pure and distilled: no spiritual writer plunges us deeper into the well of loneliness and anguish; no spiritual writer more deftly scoops us out of our despair and self-loathing and restores us to blessedness and joy.

BRENDAN WALSH, *Editor, The Tablet, UK*

One of the great contemporary spiritual masters leads us on a transformative journey to the sacred center. A life-changing retreat.

RICHARD ROHR, *Center for Action and Contemplation*

This extraordinary book draws on the authors' own profound knowledge of Henri Nouwen's life and writings to invite us on a spiritual journey. Our principal guide will be Henri, one of the great spiritual masters of the past century. On the journey we will learn to discover—in every aspect of our lives—that unconditional, transformative First Love that Henri knew so intimately.

ROBERTO S. GOIZUETA, *Margaret O'Brien Flatley Professor Emeritus of Catholic Theology, Boston College*

One of Henri Nouwen's most enduring legacies is his encouragement to create space for God in our lives. Sometimes we don't know how or where to start. This wonderful book, written by two pastors steeped in the wisdom of Nouwen, provides an entry point and steady companionship to follow the call to carve out sacred time. Through profound personal stories, Scripture, as well as key spiritual truths drawn from Nouwen's canon, you will tune into your inner being and ponder the big questions—who you are, who God is, why suffering, how to love, and the real meaning of freedom—not with the head but with the heart. What a gift!

GABRIELLE EARNSHAW, *Chief Archivist, The Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, author of Henri Nouwen and the Return of the Prodigal Son: The Making of a Spiritual Classic*

For decades, the works of Henri Nouwen have been an enormous encouragement and thoughtful challenge to my faith, Christian practice, and spiritual theology. It would be hard to overstate Nouwen's impact on my life and engagement with God. This recourse, *On Retreat with Henri Nouwen: Engaging Life's Big Questions*, has been like spending time with an old friend—countless reminders of the ways God has used Nouwen's words in my life in the past, combined with a few new insights that have given lift to my life in Christ. I am so grateful. If you have been an avid Nouwen reader, this book will be a joyful renewal and reminder, and if Henri Nouwen's works are relatively new to you, I trust you will find a trove of thoughtfulness that will whet your appetite for more.

REV. DR. BRIAN M. WALLACE, *Executive Director, The Fuller Center for Spiritual and Missional Formation, Fuller Theological Seminary*

On Retreat with Henri Nouwen is a welcome gift during a time of worldwide uncertainty in which we have faced frightening questions about our very way of life as we've always known it. It speaks to us of Henri's incessant search for freedom beneath his many nervous apprehensions. In his personal and confessional style, he reconnects us with our deepest aspirations for love, harmony, and peace, in the heart of God.

SR. SUE MOSTELLER, CSJ, *Literary Executrix of the Henri Nouwen Legacy and Founding Member of the Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust and Henri Nouwen Society*

A great resource for individual and small group reflection, *On Retreat with Henri Nouwen* offers invaluable insights for those seeking greater clarity and meaning in their spiritual lives. Using Nouwen's own words on themes such as Identity, God, Love, Suffering, and Freedom, the authors Chris Pritchett and Marjorie J. Thompson have developed a series of reflections that offer hope and guidance for spiritual journeyers wishing a deeper understanding of what spirituality means in today's context.

C. VANESSA WHITE, DMIN, *Associate Professor of Spirituality and Ministry, Catholic Theological Union*

For those who have long journeyed with Henri Nouwen, and for those who are encountering him for the first time, *On Retreat with Henri Nouwen* offers a rich and inspiring new opportunity to come to know the essential writings of this incomparable spiritual master.

DAVID SYLVESTER, PHD, *President, University of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto*

Spiritual discernment has become a key concept for understanding the vision of community today. We see this in many contemporary leaders, from Pope Francis to guides like Henri Nouwen. *On Retreat with Henri Nouwen* provides an essential companion for those who desire to practice discernment as an elemental component in the "art of spiritual living."

MASSIMO FAGGIOLI, *Professor of Theology and Religious Studies, Villanova University, author of Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States (Bayard, 2021)*

Contents

	Introduction	1
CHAPTER ONE	Identity <i>Finding Myself in God</i>	8
CHAPTER TWO	God <i>Discovering the Divine</i>	37
CHAPTER THREE	Love <i>Experiencing Deep Connection</i>	65
CHAPTER FOUR	Suffering <i>Transforming Our Pain</i>	97
CHAPTER FIVE	Freedom <i>Finding Peace in Anxious Times</i>	127
CHAPTER SIX	How, Then, Shall I Live? <i>Moving from Retreat to Call</i>	157
	Endnotes	164

INTRODUCTION

“He has a literal prayer closet,” Henri’s assistant John assured me. “You have seen it?” I queried. “Yes, just a tiny closet with a small table set up as an altar.” John described the cloth, icon, chalice, and prayer book. He continued, “Henri talks about his struggles with prayer, but Henri prays every day in that little closet.” As Nouwen’s teaching, research, and editorial assistant for five years at Yale Divinity School, John knew his mentor well. My own glimpses into the personal practice of this spiritual giant were expanded when, a few years later, John became my spouse and I entered the friendship he and Henri shared.

Henri Nouwen was truly a spiritual master of the twentieth century. His legacy secures him a place of high honor in the Christian lineage of formative teachers, writers, and spiritual guides. Nouwen was a man of many words—author of more than forty books, widely sought speaker, and mentor through letters to literally thousands of people around the globe. Yet his life spoke as clearly as his words. It was a life marked by intense struggle alongside intense joy—the central paradox of his own journey. By listening prayerfully to his own struggles and joys, Henri was able to open up his spiritual discoveries and insights to others in a remarkably accessible way. His gift to the world remains the uniquely woven depth and simplicity of his teaching on the Christian spiritual life.

This book is a contribution to the commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Henri Nouwen’s death. It is intended to acquaint the reader more closely with wisdom that draws us into the healing gift of Christ’s love for all humanity. Each chapter of this book

reflects ideas and themes related to the art of living an authentically Christian life, deeply central to Nouwen's work. Just as he himself wrestled with and grew through engaging these themes in his life, Nouwen's writing on these topics invites us into our own deeper growth in receiving and giving God's faithful love.

"The Art of Living" can only be understood as the art of spiritual living in Henri's lexicon. He was not interested in a life animated or enamored by the world's values. Indeed, those who knew Henri soon discovered that he was only tenuously rooted in this physical world. His interest in food was largely a matter of ingesting adequate calories. At table with friends or colleagues, he savored physical food far less than conversation. John recalled regular lunches at Henri's apartment, where he was served Campbell's Golden Mushroom Soup, to which Henri had proudly added a dash of wine. Clothing was not of particular concern to Henri either. His basic outfit was predictable. Once, he joined a camping trip, attired in the same dark slacks, white shirt, and loafers he would have worn to the lecture hall. Henri's mind and heart were fixed on God's presence in this world. His ministry was an invitation to enter spiritual communion with Christ through contemplative prayer, and from this centered heart to offer compassionate service to the world God so loves. Henri's invitation to us mirrors his own call to live fearlessly in the Spirit while alive in this world.

Nouwen occasionally led retreats, and retreats were certainly part of his own formation as a priest. When I audited classes with Henri as a research fellow at Yale, he urged me to make a forty-day Ignatian retreat at the same Jesuit center in Ontario where he had made his retreat years earlier. Henri knew the importance of giving ourselves stretches of time to rest in God's presence and simply listen. I suspect Nouwen's strong emphasis on solitude, prayer, and written reflection stems from his own

experience with extended retreat. A few years before I first met Henri, he had been granted the highly unusual privilege of being received as a “temporary monk” at the Trappist Abbey of Genesee in upstate New York. For Henri, this represented a seven-month step away from his class schedule and speaking circuit in order, as he put it, to face his own compulsions and illusions. In his introduction to the diary he kept during this first stay at Genesee, he asks, “Is there a still point where my life is anchored and from which I can reach out with hope and courage and confidence?”¹ Perhaps Henri’s words resonate as a motivating question in our own desire for spiritual retreat.

I invite you to allow this book to serve as a guide into your own personal retreat. Each time you read a portion of these pages, let yourself step into a space apart from your ordinary activities and preoccupations. Whether you are indoors or in the natural world, allow this to be a time for prayerful reflection and meditation—as if the place in which you read and journal were your private sanctuary. There is no particular timeframe for this retreat. You can take it as deliberately as you like. Nouwen’s wisdom will serve in some ways as your guide. Yet Henri would want you to remember that by choosing to open more intentionally to God, the Holy Spirit becomes your true spiritual director.

The chapters of this book represent a natural sequence in our spiritual life. It begins with questions about our identity: Who am I? As our seeking leads us to discover our true identity in God, the question becomes: Who is God? Our images and understandings of God, explored and expanded, lead us to the very core of divine being—Love. Love seems like the happy answer to all our heartfelt desires; yet we find ourselves foundering on the rocks of suffering—personal and collective human pain. How can we understand the relationship

between God's love and our suffering? The challenges of suffering lead us finally to consider the relationship between life and death. These themes form the arc of the book and supply its chapter titles.

While living at the Genesee, Henri met regularly with his spiritual director, Abbot John Eudes Bamberger. One day Henri asked, "When I pray, to whom do I pray?" The abbot replied, "This is the real question....You will discover that it involves every part of yourself because the question, Who is the Lord to whom I pray? leads directly to the question, Who am I who wants to pray to the Lord?...This leads you to the center of meditation."² Father John Eudes might well have quoted one of the lifelong prayers of St. Francis of Assisi: "Who am I, O God; and Who art Thou?" While simple, these questions cannot be answered simplistically. In the course of faith maturation we find partial answers, not definitive ones. Rather, such questions carry us straight to the heart of an inexhaustible Mystery. This makes them good questions for the start of your retreat.

Each chapter concludes with reflection questions. Choose those that speak to your life and draw your heart to reflection. One question may raise for you a related question not suggested, which you sense is more important to consider. Follow the inner prompting of the Spirit.

Along with questions, you will find a few "action" suggestions to select from. They are designed to help you go deeper: perhaps using imagination to open up a Scripture text or a sketched image to explore the theme more fully; maybe they will inspire a new commitment in your spiritual practice or reaching out to another person. Such active exercises serve to integrate our human faculties, stimulating change in habitual ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting. Prayerful reflection and action thus help us enter more fully into the mind of Christ (see Philippians 2:5).

Identity

Finding Myself in God

“Those two are brothers,” Joseph said with a thick Kenyan accent. From his driver’s seat, he pointed to two stunning cheetahs calmly walking through the valley of the Masai Mara. It was sunset. My twelve-year-old daughter and I were on a safari at the tail end of a visit to Nairobi. Joseph was our guide. He camped with us for three days and led us through the breathtaking wilderness. Joseph knew where to go and when. He knew how many leopards lived there and where certain animals fed. He was well aware of off-trail locations where lions were sure to be sleeping. He knew when to leave a herd of elephants because that particular “Mama” would charge the van. Without a skillful guide, we would have been lost or even dead.

In many ways, the spiritual life is not unlike a safari in the wilderness. There is such breathtaking beauty, a world of wonder, and it helps to have a skillful guide who knows the terrain and can show others where to find what they came to discover. Father Henri J.M. Nouwen continues to be among the most beloved of such spiritual guides.

This chapter addresses the concept of identity and explores the topic of our belovedness—vital components of Nouwen’s writing. Henri writes: “When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who,

instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand.”⁴ Henri Nouwen is one who can guide us through the wilderness of some of the deepest questions we ask, one of them being, “Who am I?”

BELOVEDNESS

One of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is, “Who am I?” Along with determining our purpose and place in this world, finding our true identity is something sociologists suggest every young person must discover in order to flourish in adulthood. Historically, young people have tried to find identity primarily through participating in rites of passage, like confirmation or a bar/bat mitzvah. Today, we often leave it to young people to determine their identity for themselves through the choices they make in life. We say, “If you choose to work hard and get into medical school, you can become a doctor, and that will be who you are.” This puts tremendous pressure on them to create their own identity.

In his many writings, Henri Nouwen addressed the concept of identity, and the question of identity, by reframing our approach. For Nouwen, the answer to “Who am I?” comes not from what we do but from who God created us to be. In the first chapter of Genesis, we are reminded that humankind is made in God’s image, the heart of which is love. We are God’s beloved children, and it is this belovedness that motivates and marks us. As Henri proclaims, “Being the beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.”⁵ We belong to God and always will. We may well know this in our minds, yet social pressures

tempt us to display an image of ourselves that we hope will be more acceptable. We have a hunger to be accepted by people, even if that means presenting an image that is a fabrication of our true identity.

This behavior was on display for all to see in the 2019 college admissions scandal in the United States, the largest scandal in the history of college admissions in North America. Hundreds among the wealthiest elites in the United States, from CEOs to Hollywood stars, were caught in a web of bribery and fraud, having paid millions to get their overly privileged yet apparently underperforming kids into some of the most elite universities in the nation. It seems that the motivating factor for these parents was the social applause of having a child at USC instead of Cal State Long Beach, or Stanford instead of San Francisco State. This scandal revealed the desire to make the public believe that these kids got in on their own merits. Here is the message I believe these parents have sent their kids: *“You matter to the degree that you perform, or to the degree that you make me look good, or to the degree that you are successful, popular, and good looking.”* The truth is, this is the message many young people grow up hearing today. From our earliest years, we are praised for getting good grades and punished for low achievement.

According to Nouwen, we slowly grow to believe the lies that *I am what I do, I am what others say about me, and I am what I possess*. That is why Henri’s message of our truer and deeper identity as beloved children of God is so important. It is an identity not tossed about with the waves of success, failure, joy, and sorrow in life. “The great secret of the spiritual life,” Nouwen wrote, “the life of the Beloved Sons and Daughters of God, is that everything we live, be it gladness or sadness, joy or pain, health or illness, can all be part of the journey toward the full realization of our humanity.”⁶

Nouwen believed that we can claim our true identity as we grow to see ourselves in two moments in the life of Jesus: his baptism and his final Passover meal. Let's take each moment in turn.

In the baptism of Jesus, we see what many scholars have considered the first reference to the Trinity in the New Testament. When John the Baptist had submerged Jesus into the River Jordan, "just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:16–17).

But why did Jesus choose to be baptized when he did not need to repent? Most theologians agree that it was in order to identify with us and our need to be reconciled with God. It is incredibly significant that Jesus does not receive the Father's designation as the beloved until he identifies with us by being baptized in the Jordan. He does not receive the title at his birth or during his early life. No, it comes when he enters into our desperation in an identification that is so total and complete that you can hear God saying this to you as well. This is the most surprising gift—that God says to you as well as to Jesus: "*You are my priceless child; I am deeply pleased with you.*" That is who you are.

The church teaches that in our baptism we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, who binds us into the Son's relationship with the Father. It is in baptism that we are welcomed into the covenant community and entrusted to the church for the spiritual guidance that nurtures us to claim our true created identity as the beloved of God.

The second moment in Jesus' life we are meant to see ourselves in is "the Last Supper," which the church celebrates sacramentally in the Eucharist. Nouwen believed that every time we participate in

the Eucharist, we are to remember how greatly pleased God is with us. When Jesus celebrated his last Passover meal with his disciples in the upper room (also known as “the Lord’s Supper”), he used four actions or movements. Each movement is represented with a word that helps us to claim our truest and deepest identity as the beloved: *Take, Bless, Break, Give.*

1. Replacing the word “take” with “choose,” Nouwen says that, in the same way Jesus “chose” the bread, he has also chosen you from before the foundation of the world. To be chosen by God is the greatest gift and deepest experience of being human. God’s choosing is not competitive or based on your merit but is generous, based on God’s goodness and love.
2. After Jesus took the bread, he “blessed it.” To be blessed by God is to be given God’s favor. It is a love and favor so deep, so wide, and so complete that it covers over all the failures of those whom we needed to bless us but did not. Nouwen writes, “A blessing goes beyond the distinction between admiration or condemnation...between good deeds or evil deeds. A blessing touches the original goodness of the other and calls forth his or her Belovedness.”⁷
3. Though we have been given God’s blessing, we are also wounded people in a broken world. We are all recipients, participants, and inheritors of this fractured cosmos. After “giving thanks,” or “blessing” the bread, Jesus “broke” it. Nouwen helps us to see that this breaking of the bread is an image of the brokenness of each of our lives. Henri suggests that we can find freedom and new life

if we have the courage to embrace our brokenness. In doing this, we may press through our brokenness and arrive on the other side. But, he says, we must always remember to “put it under the blessing.”⁸ We are to embrace our brokenness, but not as our core identity. Because the blessing comes before the brokenness, we are to remember that our identity as “the beloved” (blessing) is deeper and truer than our experience of suffering (brokenness).

4. Finally, Jesus “gave” the bread to the disciples and invited them to eat it and remember him. Just as Jesus was “chosen” and “blessed” in his baptism (as are we in ours), Jesus’ heart was broken on the cross (as are we in life). Jesus was then able to be “given” to the world for its salvation. In the same way, Nouwen says that we are “chosen,” “blessed,” and “broken,” in order that we may be “given” or sent by God for the sake of others. If we live our lives either avoiding our brokenness or claiming it as our deepest identity, thereby forgetting that we are first chosen and blessed by God, our lives will be tossed about by the waves of insecurity, anger, and discontent.

Instead, Nouwen invites us to hear the voice of God our heavenly Father, who is so pleased with us. He is pleased not because of what we have done but because of who we most deeply are—creatures on whom God has bestowed the divine image. Before the fall of humankind lies the deeper truth that we are loved for all eternity. You are the beloved not because you finally figured out how to choose the right way. You are the beloved of God because you have always belonged to God. In the baptism of Jesus, God has found you again. In every Eucharist, God reminds you again. Nouwen invites us to prayerfully

attend to God's personal words of love and favor, saying, "Every time you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you the Beloved, you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply."⁹

Henri Nouwen believed that we come to discover our true selves best in solitude: "In solitude we discover that our life is not a possession to be defended but a gift to be shared."¹⁰ Tamp down the noise in your life so that you can hear the still, small voice calling us the Beloved. Take some time this week to be in solitude with God. Let the Spirit be present with you in your reflections and prayers. It will serve as a deep well of living water from which you can draw in times of success to remain humble and in times of distress to remain hopeful.



BELONGING

As long as we belong to this world, we will remain subject to its competitive ways and expect to be rewarded for all the good we do. But when we belong to God, who loves us without conditions, we can live as he does.¹¹

In the spring of my first year as an undergraduate student in college, I tried out for the men's soccer team as a "walk-on." I had played soccer with some success all through high school. Many of the players on the college team were my friends, and I played soccer with them for fun on a regular basis. After several weeks of tryouts, the assistant coach gave me notice that I was cut from the team. I was devastated. I had

always belonged on the soccer field with my teammates. Suddenly, I felt not only rejection but a sense of disorientation. Something that was supposed to be part of my life no longer was. Every time I saw the players, I was confronted with the reality that I did not belong to the team. Every time they had a home game, I would hide my pain with laughter and cheer as I rooted for the team from the bleachers. When we do not have a deep sense of belonging, we experience feelings of rejection more acutely. When we experience rejection, we quickly forget that we are loved and can easily say to ourselves, “I am not good enough.” Or, “I am not worthy.” Our feelings of being rejected by others become the justification by which we then reject ourselves. “It must be true,” we might think, or “I do not belong here.”

But a “deep sense” of belonging is not tossed to and fro by the experiences and feelings of acceptance or rejection in everyday life. Our temporary experiences of rejection are never the last word. When we do experience rejection, a deep sense of belonging reminds us of the profound truth that in fact we belong to one another, to ourselves, and to the world, precisely because we belong to God from everlasting to everlasting. A deep sense of belonging is rooted in the knowledge of our eternal belovedness. No group, no soccer team, no community or nation can take that truth away. We belong to God and in God’s family for all eternity. When we know this to be true—not just with our intellect but in our heart—we are given the gifts of patience, resilience, and faith.

There was a time in Henri Nouwen’s life when he experienced great anguish. This season of inner turmoil took place from December 1987 to June 1988, after he had left his prestigious position as a professor at Harvard Divinity School in order to serve alongside persons with disabilities at the L’Arche Daybreak Community in Toronto. He

referred to this as the most difficult season in his life. Reflecting on his anguish, Nouwen wrote: "I had come face to face with my own nothingness. It was as if all that had given my life meaning was pulled away and I could see nothing in front of me but a bottomless abyss."¹² During these months, Henri wrote an intimate and intense "secret" journal that, by the encouragement of his friends, was later published as *The Inner Voice of Love*. In this book, Nouwen wrote sixty-three imperatives. We will look at three of these commands. Each of them teaches us something valuable about the "deep sense" of belonging, what it involves, and how it is formed in our lives.

The first imperative: *Accept Your Identity as a Child of God*. Henri wrote to himself: "Your true identity is as a child of God. This is the identity you have to accept. Once you have claimed it and settled in it, you can live in a world that gives you much joy as well as pain."¹³

According to Nouwen, our lives here on earth are momentary experiences where God gives us the opportunity not only to accept divine love for us but to say, "I love you," back. To be clear, Nouwen did not imagine that once we have claimed our deepest identity as children of God we no longer need the love and acceptance of other human beings. Not at all. We do, in fact, need the imperfect love of family and friends to remind us that we are perfectly loved only by a Love surpassing any human love. Nouwen went on to write: "You need spiritual guidance; you need people who can keep you anchored in your true identity."¹⁴

The second imperative: *Claim Your Unique Presence in Your Community*. "Your unique presence in your community is the way God wants you to be present to others. Different people have different ways of being present. You have to know and claim your way.... That will help you decide what to do and what to let go of, what to

say and what to remain silent about, when to go out and when to stay home, who to be with and who to avoid.”¹⁵ Henri learned this imperative the hard way. He loved being with people but had so much love to give that he often exhausted himself in caregiving and ended his day feeling lonely and depressed.

On the one hand, Nouwen loved people and wanted to share Jesus’ love with them; on the other hand, he recognized that he often acted from his own need to be loved *by* others, a need that sometimes drove people away from him. Then he would find himself feeling rejected and empty, as though his well had run dry. Henri discovered that only God can give the kind of sustainable and resilient love for which he was looking. Only God could offer him the “living water” (John 7:37–38) of complete belonging.

Nouwen writes, “Your way of being present to your community may require times of absence, prayer, writing, or solitude. These too are times for your community. They allow you to be deeply present to your people and speak words that come from God in you.”¹⁶ Through his practice of solitude and prayer, Henri learned how to love well and find joy in being with God. He learned how to let go of expecting the community to meet all his needs and discovered the deep rest of belonging to God’s love.

The third imperative: *Always Come Back to the Solid Place*. “You must believe in the yes that comes back when you ask, ‘Do you love me?’ You must *choose* this yes even when you do not experience it.”¹⁷

The key word here is *choose*. Faith is always a choice. Love is always a choice. We are constantly receiving messages that tell us we do not belong. We are told that we belong only *if* we work hard or dress a certain way or make a certain amount of money. At the beginning and the end of each day, we must choose to believe that we belong to God.

affirms us in a way no human voice ever could. The basis of all ministry is the experience of God's unlimited and unlimiting acceptance of us as beloved children, an acceptance so full, so total, and all-embracing, that it sets us free from our compulsion to be seen, praised, and admired and frees us for Christ, who leads on the road of service.

This experience of God's acceptance frees us from our needy self and thus creates new space where we can pay selfless attention to others. This new freedom in Christ allows us to move in the world uninhibited by our compulsions and to act creatively even when we are laughed at and rejected, even when our words and actions lead us to death.³⁰

For Retreat and Reflection

QUESTIONS TO JOURNAL WITH (*select those that draw you*)

1. Are you convinced in your mind that God loves you completely without conditions? Why or why not? Does your heart trust your belovedness in God's eyes? What strengthens or undermines your trust?
2. Where is your sense of belonging most rooted? Do those roots grow deep down into the soil of God's love, or are they more attached to various identity groups in the world? What imperatives would you write to yourself to help keep you rooted in God's love?

3. What does it mean to you that the “image of God” is implanted in all human beings, including you? How does it help you to value what God clearly cherishes? If this “truest self” is sheer gift, how does it free you to live in this world?
4. Of the five false narratives presented in this chapter, which do you find most seductive? Why? How can you best counter these false messages about who you are? What practices might help you listen more closely to the “voice from the balcony”?
5. When have you known self-rejection? When have you felt genuine self-acceptance of both your gifts and your weaknesses? What have been the fruits of each path?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND PRAYERFUL ACTIONS:

A SELF-GUIDED MEDITATION ON RECEIVING DIVINE LOVE

- Sit quietly in the presence of Jesus. Hear him speak tenderly to you of his heart—the heart of God’s immense and endless love for you.
- Whenever you feel resistance, let yourself speak: “But, Lord, I am....” Tell him your fears; share your shame; confess your guilt.
- Each time you object with “But,” hear him respond in words like these: “Yes, I understand. And I love you still. You are made in God’s love, for God’s love, to respond in love. Do not lose heart. You are a work in progress. I am with you always, drawing you into my own heart.”
- Let your dialogue flow in this vein until you feel calm and centered. Give thanks.

- Choose a word or phrase from this meditation and carry it with you into the rest of your day.

AND/OR:

In your journal, write a letter of encouragement to yourself as if from the perspective of a wise friend or experienced spiritual guide. What words can quiet the clamor of “voices from the cellar”? What words would you offer from “the balcony voice” that knows clearly who you are?

Note in your calendar to read this letter in a month’s time and record what you notice in yourself.

In the Next Chapter...

We have chosen to begin exploring “the art of living” under the theme of identity. Who are we as human beings? Who am I, individually, among so many people? Our true identity is part of a great mystery—the mystery of life itself—which perhaps is why we seem to be psychologically and spiritually “wired” to seek answers to these questions.

Yet questions about our human identity are invariably linked to questions about divine identity. Countless theologians through the centuries have affirmed that knowledge of self and knowledge of God cannot be separated. Once we get clear that our true identity as human beings is found in acknowledging ourselves as sons and daughters of the living God, we naturally begin to turn our attention more directly to the nature of this God in whose image we are made. What does it mean to be children of such a God?

As important as it is to find clarity on *what we are not* (not defined by what we possess, or what we do, or how others think of us), it is equally crucial to come to clarity on *what God is not*. Our images of God can be just as muddled and damaging as our images of ourselves. Here is where, as Christians, we can look to Jesus as the embodiment of God's life and spirit in our world. Jesus gives us a clear lens through which to see the true character of God, the authentic nature of divine being, a living picture of the One "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:8). So, we turn to the theme of chapter 2, "God: Discovering the Divine."