

When *Annie Hall* came out in 1977, I was nine years old. Naturally, I didn't see it. All I knew was that I was furious that it won the Oscar for Best Film instead of my choice: *Star Wars*. I have since changed my opinion. Some have said that there are two eras in Romantic Comedy films, or Rom-Coms: Before *Annie Hall* and After *Annie Hall*. Written and directed by Woody Allen, the film synthesized novel cinematic elements: non-linear storytelling, flash backs, flash forwards, cutaway gags, the use of cartoons, breaking the fourth wall (which means speaking directly to the camera), and not having a happy-ever-after ending. In the final monologue, Alvy Singer—the protagonist played by Woody Allen—reflects on the breakup of his relationship with Annie, played by Diane Keaton, with an old joke: “This guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, ‘Doc, my brother’s crazy. He thinks he’s a chicken.’ And the doctor says, ‘Well, why didn’t you bring him with you?’ And the guy says, ‘Well, I would, but I need the eggs.’” Singer concludes, “I guess that’s pretty much how I feel about relationships. You know, they’re totally irrational and crazy and absurd...but I guess we keep goin’ through it because most of us need the eggs.”

Not every relationship is irrational, crazy, or absurd, but some are. And yet some of us find it difficult to separate ourselves from them even when they are not good for us; in mysterious ways, we need the “eggs” they give us. In the Recovery Community, this is sometimes described as co-dependency. Sometimes a person relies so heavily on another person for self-affirmation, meaning, and purpose that they sacrifice their own needs and well-being to try to “fix” them. A friend of mine has been in Recovery for about twenty years. Before then, when he was using, he had been married for twenty years. We can imagine that it must have been a difficult relationship. When he left his rehabilitation and came home clean and sober, we might imagine that his clearly long-suffering wife celebrated his return. Within a month, she filed for divorce. I do not know her and will not judge her; at the same time, I wonder whether she preferred a relationship with someone she was trying to fix over

one with someone who no longer needed to be fixed. This phenomenon is not limited to marriages. It can be found among other dysfunctional family members, between people and their all-consuming professions—including some congregations and their clergy, or even within ourselves: we can become attached to our fear-based perspectives, control-centered attitudes, and desperate coping mechanisms. Sometimes we simply want to continue to think or do what we think or do even when presented with a better alternative. Contrary to what the 17th and 18th century Enlightenment suggested, human beings are not primarily rational; as St. Augustine taught in the 5th century, we are primarily passionate, driven by and attached to the irrational desires of our hearts. And, as Emily Dickenson wrote in 1862, as Selena Gomez sang in 2014, and as Woody Allen himself said about his relationship with Soon-Yi, “the heart wants what it wants.”

Today’s Gospel reading can help us understand Jesus as a divine intervention for a kind of universal human co-dependency. Leaving the Temple in Jerusalem, his followers are awestruck by the beauty and the grandeur of the city and its buildings. Pure gold sheathed the entire outer façade. It is said that reflection of the sun from Jerusalem’s gold and marble buildings was so dazzling that it could be seen from miles away. But the grandeur of the Temple complex is only part of the reason Jesus’ disciples are thunderstruck. They are more overwhelmed by its meaning and purpose. The Temple contained the Presence of God Himself; its altars and their sacrifices brought Him and His people together in a way that nothing else could. Like the DeLorean Time Machine and its Flux Capacitor in 1985’s film *Back to the Future* which propelled Marty McFly and Doc Brown from the present into either the past or the future, the Jerusalem Temple and its Altars of sacrifice propelled the people of God from the realm of time into the eternal Kingdom of Heaven where there and only there they found God’s forgiveness and blessing. The fact that the sacrifices of the Temple had been corrupted by power-hungry priests and greedy moneychangers was seen as a necessary evil by

a co-dependent Hebrew nation that needed its sacrifices more than it wanted to pursue mercy and righteousness.

Therefore, instead of agreeing with his disciples' wonder, Jesus redirects their attention. He tells them, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down (Mark 13:2)." Then He paints a portrait of the destruction of Jerusalem. What He foresaw came to pass: thirty-seven years later, the Roman General Pompey burned Jerusalem to the ground with fire so hot that the gold in the Temple melted into the cracks of the foundation stones, motivating the soldiers to pulverize the stones to retrieve their now-precious golden mortar. Why does Jesus say what He says? What does Mark include this in his Gospel, which is the shortest and contains the fewest of Jesus' words?

First, Jesus is trying to shift His disciples' focus from the Temple to Himself. The Temple contains the Presence of God; Jesus is God Himself in the flesh. The Temple hosts hundreds of priests who offer endless sacrifices to obtain again and again the forgiveness of the Hebrews' sins; Jesus is Himself the One Great High Priest and the Lamb of God who will sacrifice Himself to obtain once and for all the forgiveness of the sins of the whole world. The Temple is the place to which people travel to find God; Jesus is the Son of God who has traveled from Heaven to find us, to claim us, to save us, to redeem us, and to bring us home with Him to the Father. The Temple would be destroyed and remain in ruins as it does today, two thousand years later; the Temple of Jesus' body would be destroyed at His death on the Cross but raised from the dead three days later as a foretaste of His promise to raise us all from our graves and lead us to the eternal life of the Resurrection with the Father and with all the other saints among the angels.

Secondly, Mark includes this saying because of what it means for his immediate audience. Remember that Mark's Gospel is being dictated to him by St. Peter who is in

prison while he waits to be crucified during the Church's persecution in Rome in 64 AD under the Emperor Nero. The Roman Christians whom Peter served and led are petrified; they face not only the death of their beloved bishop but the very real prospect of their own deaths. They are facing the end of the world. When Peter, through Mark, goes on to give Jesus' description of the end of the world—wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines—he is trying to reframe the Roman Christians' experience not as mere terror and destruction but the beginning of something as new and wonderful as a newborn. Jesus says that these apocalyptic signs are simply “the beginning of the birth pangs (Mark 13.8).” He is saying that their suffering is real but that their suffering has meaning and is leading to a purpose that will ultimately transcend and redeem it. They cannot imagine what God will ultimately do with what they are going through, and could never foresee that it would include us being gathered here today as followers of Jesus for whom they gave their lives as witnesses.

Finally, God the Holy Spirit inspires Peter and Mark to include this saying because of what it means for us. We do not know what it is like to face persecution and death in the Roman Colosseum. But we do know what it is like to be thrown down like the buildings in Jerusalem; we know what it is like to face the end of the world. Sudden news or gradual awareness of bodily illness or frailty can feel like the end of the world. Sudden job loss or rising economic insecurity can feel like the end of the world. The prospect or the reality of divorce, betrayal, or abandonment can feel like the end of the world. The death of a loved one can feel like the end of the world. Today, right now, whether we are aware of it or not, someone we know feels like their world is coming to an end—including perhaps someone in this very room. Through today's Scripture, God the Holy Spirit is reassuring us and all who feel at the end of their world that the pain we feel, which is very real, is simply the birth pangs of new and greater life that God—like a midwife—is helping to birth in us through it.

In the March 2019 issue of *Women and Birth*, a journal of the Australian College of Midwives, Dr. Laura Whitburn published a study about the nature of labor pain. She asserts that as important as medical interventions are, the mental and emotional perspective of the birthing mother can be at least as equally important in her experience of labor pain. She says, “if a woman can sustain the belief that her pain is purposeful [...] and if she interprets her pain as productive [...] it would be expected that she would experience the pain as a non-threatening, transformative life event.”¹ I have no right to make any claims about labor pain. But if Dr. Whitburn is correct, then when Jesus describes our temporal pain as “the beginning of the birth pangs,” we might begin to see through the lens of faith and hope that, in the redemptive grace of our all-compassionate God, all our suffering will ultimately be revealed as purposeful and productive. By reframing the pain and suffering we all go through, which God goes through with us, God tames it, makes it more manageable, and leads us to see that it will one day be fruitful for us and for the others we can serve better because of it.

Being fallen people in a fallen world, we are often too attached to the things that can only bring us pain. But God loves us too much to let us remain co-dependent with anything that hurts us even when those things give us the cracked and empty eggshells we think we need. Jesus said that God broods over us like a hen gathering her chicks under her wings (Luke 13:34).² We do not need the eggs the world offers us. We are God’s eggs, and we cannot imagine the wonder of what He will reveal in us when we finally hatch, take flight in His love, and soar.

¹ Laura UY. Whitburn, “The nature of labour pain: An updated review of the literature,” *Women and Birth*, Volume 32, Issue 1, February 2019.