

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term III.6

The Confessions of Saint Augustine (354-430)

In those years when I first began to teach rhetoric in my native town, I had made one my friend, but too dear to me, from a community of pursuits, of mine own age, and, as myself, in the first opening flower of youth. He had grown up of a child with me, and we had been both school-fellows and play-fellows. But he was not yet my friend as afterwards, nor even then, as true friendship is; for true it cannot be, unless in such as You cement together, cleaving unto You, by that love which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, which is given unto us. Yet was it but too sweet, ripened by the warmth of kindred studies: for, from the true faith (which he as a youth had not soundly and thoroughly imbibed), I had warped him also to those superstitious and pernicious fables, for which my mother bewailed me [the teachings of the Manichaeans, which Augustine was then teaching]. With me he now erred in mind, nor could my soul be without him. But behold You were close on the steps of Your fugitives, at once God of vengeance, and Fountain of mercies, turning us to Yourself by wonderful means; You took that man out of this life, when he had scarce filled up one whole year of my friendship, sweet to me above all sweetness of that my life.

Who can recount all Your praises, which he has felt in himself? What did You do then, my God, and how unsearchable is the abyss of Your judgments? For long, sore sick of a fever, he lay senseless in a death-sweat; and his recovery being despaired of, he was baptized, unknowing; myself meanwhile little regarding, and presuming that his soul would retain rather what it had received of me, not what was wrought on his unconscious body. But it proved far otherwise: for he was refreshed, and restored. Forthwith, as soon as I could speak with him (and I could, so soon as he was able, for I never left him, and we hung but too much upon each other), I essayed to jest with him, as though he would jest with me at that baptism which he had received, when utterly absent in mind and feeling, but had now understood that he had received. But he so shrunk from me, as from an enemy; and with a wonderful and sudden freedom bade me, as I would continue his friend, forbear such language to him. I, all astonished and amazed, suppressed all my emotions till he should grow well, and his health were strong enough for me to deal with him as I would. But he was taken away from my frenzy, that with You he might be preserved for my comfort; a few days after in my absence, he was attacked again by the fever, and so departed.

At this grief my heart was utterly darkened; and whatever I beheld was death. My native country was a torment to me, and my father's house a strange unhappiness; and whatever I had shared with him, lacking him, became a distracting torture. My eyes sought him everywhere, but he was not granted

them; and I hated all places, because they did not have him; nor could they now tell me, “he is coming,” as when he was alive and absent. I became a great riddle to myself, and I asked my soul, why she was so sad, and why she disquieted me sorely: but she knew not what to answer me. And if I said, Trust in God, she very rightly obeyed me not; because that most dear friend, whom she had lost, was, being human, both truer and better than that phantasm she was bid to trust in [Augustine at this point lacked the proper understanding of God.]. Only tears were sweet to me, for they succeeded my friend, in the dearest of my affections.

And now, Lord, these things are passed by, and time has assuaged my wound. May I learn from You, who are Truth, and approach the ear of my heart unto Your mouth, that You may tell me why weeping is sweet to the miserable? Have You, although present everywhere, cast away our misery far from Yourself? And You abide in Yourself, but we are tossed about in diverse trials. And yet unless we mourned in Your ears, we should have no hope left. Whence then is sweet fruit gathered from the bitterness of life, from groaning, tears, sighs, and complaints? Does this sweeten it, that we hope You hear? This is true of prayer, for therein is a longing to approach unto You. But is it also in grief for a thing lost, and the sorrow wherewith I was then overwhelmed? For I neither hoped he should return to life, nor did I desire this with my tears; but I wept only and grieved. For I was miserable, and had lost my joy. Or is weeping indeed a bitter thing, and for very loathing of the things which we before enjoyed, does it then, when we shrink from them, please us?

But why do I speak of these things? for now is no time to question, but to confess unto You. Wretched I was; and wretched is every soul bound by the friendship of perishable things; he is torn asunder when he loses them, and then he feels the wretchedness which he had before he lost them. So was it then with me; I wept most bitterly, and found my repose in bitterness. Thus was I wretched, and that wretched life I held dearer than my friend. For though I would willingly have changed it, yet was I more unwilling to part with it than with him; yea, I know not whether I would have parted with it even for him, as is related (if not feigned) of Pylades and Orestes, that they would gladly have died for each other or together, not to live together being to them worse than death. But in me there had arisen some unexplained feeling, too contrary to this, for at once I loathed exceedingly to live and feared to die. I suppose, the more I loved him, the more did I hate and fear death as a most cruel enemy, which had bereaved me of him: and I imagined it would speedily make an end of all people, since it had power over him. Thus was it with me, I remember. Behold my heart, O my God, behold and see into me; for well I remember it, O my Hope, who cleanses me from the impurity of such affections, directing my eyes towards You, and plucking my feet out of the snare. For I wondered that others, subject to death, did live, since he whom I loved as if he should never die, was dead; and I wondered yet more that I, who was to him a second self, could live, he being dead. Well said one of his friend, “Thou half of my soul”; for I felt that my soul and his soul were “one soul in two bodies”: and therefore was my life a horror to me, because I would not live halved. And therefore perchance I feared to die, lest he whom I had much loved should die wholly.

O madness, which knows not how to love men as men should be loved! O foolish man that I then was, enduring impatiently the lot of man! I fretted then, sighed, wept, was distracted; had neither rest nor counsel. I carried about my pierced and bloodied soul, rebellious at being carried by me, but I could find no place where I might put it down. Not in calm groves, not in games and music, nor in fragrant spots, nor in curious banquets, nor in the pleasures of the bed and the couch; nor (finally) in books or poetry, found it repose. All things looked ghastly, even the very light; whatsoever was not what he was, was revolting and hateful, except groaning and tears. For in those alone found I a little refreshment. But when my soul was withdrawn from them, a huge load of misery weighed me down. To You, O Lord, it ought to have been raised, for You to lighten; I knew it; but neither could nor would; the more, since, when I thought of You, You were not to me any solid or substantial thing. For to me then you were not what you are, but an empty phantom, and my error was my god. If I attempted to put my burden there, so that it might rest, it hurtled back upon me through the void, and I myself remained an unhappy place where I could not abide and from which I could not depart. For where could my heart fly to, away from my heart? Where could I fly to, apart from my own self? And yet I fled out of my country; for so should my eyes less look for him, where they were not wont to see him. And thus from Thagaste, I came to Carthage.

Times lose no time; nor do they roll idly by; through our senses they work strange operations on the mind. Behold, they went and came day by day, and by coming and going, introduced into my mind other imaginations and other remembrances; and little by little patched me up again with my old kind of delights, unto which that my sorrow gave way. And yet there succeeded, not indeed other griefs, yet the causes of other griefs. For whence had that former grief so easily reached my very inmost soul, but that I had poured out my soul upon the dust, in loving one that must die as if he would never die? For what restored and refreshed me chiefly was the solaces of other friends, with whom I did love, what instead of You I loved; and this was a great fable, and protracted lie, by whose adulterous stimulus, our soul, which lay itching in our ears, was being defiled. But that fable would not die to me, so oft as any of my friends died. There were other things which in them did more take my mind; to talk and jest together, to do kind offices by turns; to read together well-written books; to play the fool or be earnest together; to dissent at times without discontent, as a man might with his own self; and even with the seldomness of these dissentings, to season our more frequent consentings; sometimes to teach, and sometimes learn; long for the absent with impatience; and welcome the coming with joy. These and the like expressions, proceeding out of the hearts of those that loved and were loved again, by the countenance, the tongue, the eyes, and a thousand pleasing gestures, were so much fuel to melt our souls together, and out of many make but one.

This is it that is loved in friends; and so loved, that a man's conscience condemns itself, if he love not him that loves him again, or love not again him that loves him, looking for nothing from his person but indications of his love. Hence that mourning if one dies, and the darkening of sorrows, that steeping of the heart in tears, all sweetness turned to bitterness; and upon the loss of life of the dying, the death of the living. Blessed is the one who loves You, and his friend in You, and his enemy for Your sake. For he

alone loses none dear to him, to whom all are dear in Him who cannot be lost. And who is this but our God, the God that made heaven and earth, and fills them, because by filling them He created them? You no one loses, but the one who leaves. And the one who leaves You, where does he go, or whither does he flee, but from You well-pleased, to You displeased? For where does he not find Your law in his own punishment? And Your law is truth, and You are truth.

Turn us, O God of Hosts, show us Your countenance, and we shall be whole. For whatever way the soul of man turns, it is fixed upon sorrows any place except in you, even though it is fixed upon beautiful things that are outside of you and outside of itself. Yet these beautiful things would not be at all, unless they came from you. They rise and they set, and by rising, as it were, they begin to be. They increase, so as to become perfect, and when once made perfect, they grow old and die, and even though all things do not grow old, yet all die. Therefore, then they take their rise and strive to be, the more quickly they grow so that they may be, so much the faster do they hasten towards ceasing to be. This is the law of their being. So much have you given them, because they are parts of things that do not exist all at once, but all of them, by successive departures and advents, make up the universe of which they are parts. And even thus is our speech completed by signs giving forth a sound: but this again is not perfected unless one word pass away when it hath sounded its part, that another may succeed. Out of all these things let my soul praise You, O God, Creator of all; yet let not my soul be riveted unto these things with the glue of love, through the senses of the body. For they go whither they were to go, that they might not be; and they rend her with pestilent longings, because she longs to be, yet loves to repose in what she loves. But in these things is no place of repose; they abide not, they flee; and who can follow them with the senses of the flesh? yea, who can grasp them, when they are hard by? For the sense of the flesh is slow, because it is the sense of the flesh; and thereby is it bounded. It suffices for that it was made for; but it suffices not to stay things running their course from their appointed starting-place to the end appointed. For in Your Word, by which they are created, they hear their decree, "hence and hitherto."

Be not foolish, O my soul, nor become deaf in the ear of your heart with the tumult of your folly. Harken you also. The Word itself calls you to return: and there is the place of quiet that can never be disturbed, where love cannot be forsaken, if it does not forsake that place. Behold, these things pass away, that others may replace them, and so this lower universe be completed by all his parts. But do I depart in any way? says the Word of God. Fix your dwelling there. Entrust to it whatever you have, my soul, wearied at last by deceptions. Entrust to the Truth whatever you have gained from the Truth, and you shall lose nothing; and your decay shall bloom again, and all your diseases be healed, and your mortal parts be reformed and renewed, and bound around you: nor shall they take you down whither they themselves descend; but they shall stand fast with you, and abide for ever before God, Who abides and stands fast forever.

Why then be perverted and follow your flesh? Let it be converted and follow you. Whatever by her you have sense of, is in part; and the whole, whereof these are parts, you do not know; and yet they

delight you. But had the sense of your flesh a capacity for comprehending the whole, and not itself also, for your punishment, been justly restricted to a part of the whole, you would want that whatever presently exists should pass away, that so the whole might better please you. For what we speak also, by the same sense of the flesh you hear; yet you would not have the syllables stay, but fly away, that others may come, and you hear the whole. And so ever, when any one thing is made up of many, all of which do not exist together, all collectively would please more than they do severally, could all be perceived collectively. But far better than these is He who made all; and He is our God, nor does He pass away, for neither does anything succeed Him.

If bodies please you, praise God on occasion of them, and turn back your love upon their Maker; lest in these things which please you, you displease God. If souls please you, let them be loved in God: for they too are mutable, but in Him are they firmly stablished; else would they pass, and pass away. In Him then let them be beloved; and carry to Him along with yourself what souls you can, and say to them, “Him let us love, Him let us love: He made these, nor is He far off. For He did not make them, and so depart, but they are of Him, and in Him. See there He is, where truth is loved. He is within the very heart, yet the heart has strayed from Him. Go back into your heart, you transgressors, and cleave fast to Him that made you. Stand with Him, and ye shall stand fast. Rest in Him, and ye shall be at rest. Whither, upon what rough ways, do you wander? Whither do you go? The good you love is from him, but only in so far as it is used for him is it good and sweet. But with justice it will become bitter, if you, as a deserter from him, unjustly love what comes from him. Whither do you walk, farther and farther along these hard and toilsome roads? There is no rest to be found where you seek it: seek what you seek, but it lies not where you seek it. You seek a happy life in the land of death, but it is not there. How can you find a happy life where there is no life?

“But our true Life came down to us, and bore away our death, and slew him, out of the abundance of His own life: and He thundered, calling aloud to us to return hence to Him into that secret place, whence He came forth to us. For he came first into the Virgin's womb, wherein He espoused the human creation, our mortal flesh, that it might not be forever mortal, and thence like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, rejoicing as a giant to run his course. For He lingered not, but ran, calling aloud by words, deeds, death, life, descent, ascension; crying aloud to us to return unto Him. And He departed from our eyes, that we might return into our heart, and find Him there. For He departed, and lo, He is here. He would not be long with us, yet he did not leave us; for He departed thither, whence He never parted, because the world was made by Him. And He was in this world, and into this world He came to save sinners, unto whom my soul confesses, and He heals it, for it has sinned against Him. O you sons of men, how long will you be so slow of heart? Even now, after the descent of Life to you, will you not ascend and live? But how can you ascend, when you have set yourselves up high and have placed your mouth against heaven? Descend, that you may ascend, and ascend to God. For you have fallen by ascending against God.” Tell them this, that they may weep in the valley of tears, and so carry them up with yourself unto God; because out of His spirit you speak thus unto them, if you speak burning with the fire of charity.