The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term III.6

Opening Comments

For our final session on Christian views of death and life, we turn back in time to the thought of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), for Augustine addresses the question of what difference it makes for the experience of death and loss to believe in the one true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, compared to the way one would grieve without this faith. Augustine was born in the city of Thagaste in North Africa, to parents who were associated with the Roman ruling class. Augustine's father Patricius was a pagan, but his mother Monica was a devout Catholic Christian, whom Augustine credits with praying him into the grace of God in Christ when he was an adult. Augustine was not baptized as an infant, but rather was treated as a catechumen, and was not baptized until 387. Augustine's parents encouraged him to pursue a career in rhetoric, so that he could attain a name for himself by means of his skill in persuasive speech. Augustine entered the rhetorical school in Carthage in 371, and took an unnamed concubine to be his common law wife at that time. His son Adeodatus was born in 373. During this time, Augustine read Cicero's *Hortensius*, which awakened in him a lifelong love of wisdom. However, due to his mother's influence, he could never associate himself with wisdom that did not have the name of Jesus Christ. Seeking to gain this wisdom for himself, especially with regard to the question of the nature and origin of evil, Augustine began to study Scripture. However, he was immediately offended by the inferior style of Moses in Genesis, and turned to the teaching of the Manicheans for the proper interpretation of Scripture, and for the answer to the question of the nature of evil.

The Manicheans followed the teaching of the prophet Mani (216-276), who lived in Persia. Mani understood himself to be the fulfillment of the revelation begun in Moses, and continuing through the prophets, Zoroaster, the Buddha, and Jesus Christ. Mani at times described himself as an apostle of Christ, which would allow Augustine to identify with his teaching. Mani taught that evil is from the kingdom of darkness that wages war against the kingdom of light, and takes sparks of light captive in bodies. The whole of the religious practice of Manicheans had as its goal the liberation of the sparks of light from their embodied captivity to the kingdom of darkness. In this dualistic perspective, the spirit is essentially good, as it is one with god, and the body is essentially evil. The Manichean community was organized around **the elect**, who could liberate sparks of light, and **the auditors**, who learned from them in the hope of a better reincarnation as one of the elect. Augustine became completely dedicated to this teaching as an auditor, and for nine years he used his considerable rhetorical ability to convert others to this position.

Augustine came to know the one true God by means of the guidance of the neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus. Augustine followed the contemplative path charted by Plotinus to withdraw from the outer person to the inner person, and from the inner person to the transcendent realm above the inner self. According to Plotinus, this can be done because the eternal One, the source of all things, gives rise to eternal Mind, which is the source of all minds. When we withdraw from our senses to our minds, we can ascend from our mind to the Mind which is its source. Here is how Augustine describes that experience:

> And being thence admonished to return to myself, I entered even into my inward self, You being my Guide: and able I was, for You had become my Helper. And I entered and beheld with the eye of my soul (such as it was), above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the Light Unchangeable. Not this ordinary light, which all flesh may look upon, nor as it were a greater of the same kind, as though the brightness of this should be manifold brighter, and with its greatness take up all space. Not such was this light, but other, yea, far other from these. Nor was it above my soul, as oil is above water, nor yet as heaven above earth: but above my soul, because It created me; and I below It, because I was created by It. He that knows the Truth, knows what that Light is; and he that knows It, knows eternity. Love knows it, O Truth Who is Eternity! and Love Who is Truth! and Eternity Who is Love! You are my God, to You I sigh night and day.

He describes this experience as discovering the reality that abides in the midst of a world that is constantly changing. “I had found the unchangeable and true Eternity of Truth above my changeable mind. And thus with the flash of one trembling glance it arrived at THAT WHICH IS.” In his subsequent reading of Scripture, Augustine came to understand the Mind above his mind as the eternal Word of God, whose light is the life that enlightens everyone in the world (John 1:4). However, this light initially drove Augustine away from itself, because of his pride. He had to learn from the Apostle Paul that the Word emptied itself and humbled itself to become human, to save humans from sin and death. Only when he learned to cast himself in humility on the crucified Christ was Augustine lifted up to the eternal Word of God, which was the light always present in his heart and mind. “[Christ] heals their swellings and nourishes their love, so that they may not go on further in self-confidence, but rather become weak. For at their feet they see the Godhead, weak because of its participation in our ‘coats of skin,’ and in their weariness they may cast themselves upon it, while it arises and lifts them up.”

In the passage we are reading from the *Confessions*, which were written between 397-400, Augustine is describing the intimate friendship he developed with a friend of his while he was studying rhetoric and teaching Manichaean thought, when his friend suddenly and unexpectedly died. Augustine describes his experience of this death from two different perspectives: his experience at the time as a Manichaean who did not know Eternity, Truth, and Love; and his experience as a Catholic Christian who knows both the Word incarnate and the Word deep within himself. When Augustine did not know God, he loved his friend as though his friend would never die, and so when he suddenly died, everything became death to Augustine. “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." He came to see all of his relationships as darkened by death, for if his dear friend could die, so could everyone else that Augustine loved. "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. 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." Augustine seems to have known that he should seek refuge in God for his grief and loss, but as he did not know God, he discovered that his love for his friend was more real to him than his god. "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." And when he grew weary of carrying his bruised and badly battered heart, and sought to rest it in God, the phantom in whom he believed at the time could not sustain his heart, and so it collapsed back into his arms.

> 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. 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?

When he sought solace in the love of his other friends, he only created more occasions for grief and suffering, since these friends were destined to die just as his other friend had been. "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?" As Augustine realized when he came to know eternal Truth, everything in the world comes into being only to pass away again, and this is what everything is created to do, even as when we speak each word can only arise when the previous word comes to an end. The problem is that we seek that which abides in the world that is constantly passing away, and when we do this, our hearts are torn apart. "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." This was the cause of Augustine's unbearable grief when his friend died, and it cast the shadow of death across his whole life. "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."

Augustine tells us that the solution to this problem is not to stop loving others, but to start loving the eternal God, so that we include our love for others in our love for God. "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?" When we love God, we find the place of refuge that will never disappoint us, and so we cease seeking refuge in others that we love in the world.

> Be not foolish, O my soul, nor become deaf in the ear of your heart with the tumult of your folly. Hearken 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.

The alternative to this is to seek rest for our hearts in other creatures whom we love, for our hearts long to abide, and they desire to repose in the one they love. Augustine warns himself that this attempt is doomed to failure. "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?" However, when we love God, and love others in God, our love for them abides in God, and hence does not suffer any loss, and their death does not tear our souls apart in grief. "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." We can do this, because the eternal Word which is the light of our minds and hearts became flesh, died, and rose again, so that we might return to our hearts and find eternal life there. "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 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."