

Dissolving bitterness (or learning to trust the church again)

By [Martha-Lynn Corner](#)

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Once, when I was about seven, I jumped into the car after school and grabbed a Thermos rolling around on the floor. I was sweaty and dying of thirst and expecting water, or lukewarm juice, but was hit instead with a mouthful of my mother's leftover coffee.

It was horrendous.

I managed to swallow it but immediately burst into tears at having been subjected to what I was absolutely certain was the foulest substance on the planet. "Why?" I remember saying over and over. Why was it there for me to find? Why would my (rushed, working, exhausted) mother have put her coffee in one of my Thermoses? Why would anybody drink that stuff to begin with? It was so bitter.

Now, of course, I love coffee. I even drink it black. As an adult I'm desensitized to the bitterness, which is fine when it comes to a cup or two of joe but problematic when it comes to the bitterness in my own life. It's been bolstered by a sense of injury, and more than a little self-righteousness, and the hard fact that even those we love and trust are human, and can trip up and make mistakes with grave and lasting consequences.

And I've been dwelling there, making a theme park of sorts, with season tickets to the imprecatory Psalms and table-kicking Jesus and related rides on a rollercoaster about the church and how "good" it's supposed to really be when the church is capable of harm. Because I was hurt in a church and feeling it. And feeling little else.

But then on a friend's Facebook page I clicked on a link in which blogger Addie Zierman [quotes a sermon by Rob Bell](#): "People say they've been hurt by the church. . . . And I say, 'What was his name? What was her name?'"

Zierman herself continues: "The truth, he'd said, was that organizations can't hurt you. Churches themselves can't hurt you. People hurt each other."

I've been thinking about that a lot this week. I've also been listening to the song "[The Queen and the Soldier](#)" by Suzanne Vega, in which a soldier dares to question institutional politics and learns that the queen's wars are born of her own brokenness, "a secret burning thread" inside her. The queen refuses to look at the suffering of the battlefield, choosing instead to order the soldier's death. The thread inside her might burn, but it's what she knows. She can't give it up. She chooses bitterness and discord over reconciliation.

I've been making those choices, too. When you choose to wall yourself up in bitterness and pain, it can be difficult to remember how beloved you are. How beloved is the world, and the people in it. To remember that the potential for evil and sin are a very real part, but not the whole, of yourself and of other people.

The queen's kingdom is made-up, but the pain and complexities are as much a part of the kingdom of God, which Paul defines as a matter of "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). Not bitterness. Not an inability to extend forgiveness. Not an inability to remember that the body—the church—is made up of individual members, broken people struggling to do the best they can. And that often, that best is outstanding.

Last night, I watched as my little girl approached the altar with hands outstretched for the very first time, accepting and partaking at the table where we meet the risen Christ. She was worried about how the wine would taste, so I held onto my own wafer and showed her how to intinct. She did so slowly and delicately and reverently, and we were wreathed in smiles all the way back to our seats. There she knelt, forehead smushed into the pew back, whispering prayers for her school friends, for her father and me, and even (after a pause) for her little brother.

I gulped back tears and played with her hair. These nearly seven years with her have been a grain of sand, an ant's breath, a half millisecond pulse in the beat of a butterfly's wing.

As we received well-wishes and congratulations I took a moment to consider all of these people caught up in their own complexities, fighting sadness and addiction and apathy, and still persevering, still showing up in church, still kneeling with palms outstretched for broken bread to soothe their broken hearts.

In the Suzanne Vega song, the battle-weary soldier visits the young queen to refuse to fight any longer, because he's lost the will and conviction:

*I've seen more battles lost than I've seen battles won*

That's simply not true for me, I realized. I've seen more battles won than lost within the church. I've seen more good done than harm, more victory than loss, more surety that the Spirit is alive and well than damaged or absent or apathetic. It is in that kingdom I wish to dwell. It is in that righteousness, peace, and joy that I choose to dissolve the thread of my own bitterness over what happened to me in a church. Because holding the hand of someone wide-eyed and innocent and precious is happening, too, and she is just learning that Jesus loves her, and is alive and worth loving in return.

I am working hard to remember all of those same things, walking side by side with her towards the table where we join the millions reinforced by the church and the love we find there.

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