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LOVE IN A TIME OF SCARCITY: AN EVENT- HERMENEUTICAL INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

Love as a theological virtue raises difficult questions. How can love be a gift from God, and yet at the same time human beings can be praised for the love of others? How can love be infused by God, and also be an act of free will? An event-hermeneutical approach can help us to find answers to these questions. This article presents an event-hermeneutical reading of the parable of the prodigal son, and the phenomenological analysis of love by Harry Frankfurt. The fact that a person comes to love the object of his love implies a deep transformation of the will. But love is a risk: it may happen, but it need not. The (im)possibility of transformation is deepened by looking at the phenomenon of scarcity. At the end of the article, the author summarises five elements of a theological theory on the virtue of love in a time of scarcity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thank God, love happens! That is the shortest possible summary of this article. We don't know when it may happen; but when it does, we are drawn beyond what we previously considered possible. Love is an event that knocks us out of our hinges. And yet we long for it to appear. And we should love others: the persons we know and live with, and the poor, who live among us but have no names and no faces.

We begin our argument with some hard question about love as a theological virtue. If love is a gift from God, does that mean that human beings can only wait for this gift to arrive? What is the relationship

between this gift and the human virtues of love and charity? Can it be a virtue, even though it is a gift from God? Recently, in Catholic theology, there has been renewed interest in the so-called theological virtues, and specifically in the contribution of Thomas Aquinas on this topic. We will draw on this debate in order to elaborate on the perplexity of love as a theological virtue.

From which hermeneutical perspective should we answer these questions? In section three, we will introduce the hermeneutics of event as developed by Ingolf Dalferth. The hermeneutics of event focuses on the dynamic process of meaning construction that takes place when we come to the understanding of the event of love (i.e. when love “happens”).

In the next step (section four), we will show that an event-hermeneutical interpretation of love helps us to understand the theological virtue of love. We will argue along two complementary lines: we will interpret the event of love in the text of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32), and in the phenomenological analysis of the event of love as presented by the ethicist Harry Frankfurt. Based on this event-hermeneutical interpretation of love, we will answer the questions raised in the first section.

From a practical theological perspective, it is not enough to know how (theologically) love happens; we also need to understand the embodied human condition in which it happens. We will show that the perplexity of love is magnified if we understand the phenomenon of scarcity. We will draw on the theory of scarcity as developed by Mullainathan and Shafir (2013). Scarcity reflects a mindset, related embodied practices, and a context. If we have a view of the interconnectedness of these elements, we can understand that a sustainable transformation in the life of the poor is difficult to realise.

So: how can love bring change in the lives of people who exist in scarcity? In section six, we summarise five basic ideas for a theological virtue of love which can bring deep and sustainable change in people’s social lives.

2. LOVE AS A THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE

In the last few decades there has been a revival of virtue ethics within moral philosophy and theological ethics. In order to become virtuous, it is helpful to observe others who have mastered the art of living a good life. A person grows in virtue when he or she puts into practice what it means to be virtuous. And by practising virtue, one comes to understand what it means to be virtuous. Virtue ethics has influenced Christian ethics, through

Augustine, and through Thomas Aquinas, who incorporated Aristotelian thought on virtue ethics (Hendriks, Goris & Schroot 2015:1).

At the same time, virtue ethics changed within a Christian frame of reference. The most important virtues, or cardinal virtues (Justice, Temperance, Prudence and Courage), were supplemented by the virtues of Faith, Hope and Love, which were then considered to be the most important. These virtues did not have their final criterion in human honour (Van Tongeren 2012: 155-158), but in God, as transcendent reality. They are infused in humans by God, and therefore not (just) the result of human self-development.

This shift raises many questions. Firstly, can a virtue be a matter of human excellence, and yet also be “infused by God”? Secondly, could we ever understand what this final “end” is, which is God? And finally: how does love emerge, if it is not something that human beings can control? What does this “infusion by God” imply for the “freedom of the will to love”?

We will address these questions on the basis of the debate on the view of Thomas Aquinas on the theological virtues. In the revival of virtue ethics, there is renewed interest in the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas on virtues in general, the theological virtues, and the relationship between them. We will first expand the definition of a theological virtue according to Thomas, and formulate three questions. These questions will lead us into the perplexity of what we call love from a theological perspective. We will elaborate on this perplexity at the end of this section.

What is a (theological) virtue, according to Thomas?

A virtue is a good quality of the mind by which one lives righteously, of which no-one can make bad use, and which God works in us, without us.¹

This was a widely accepted definition at the time of Thomas, fabricated in the 12th century by Peter Lombard from elements of the writings of Augustine; in particular, from his *De libero arbitrio* (Te Velde 2015: 9). For Thomas, the four intelligible causes of virtue are present in this definition (Te Velde *idem*).

- “Good quality” refers to the formal cause. Virtues are dispositions “which not only originate from certain acts, but also make someone

1 This definition is found in *STh* I-II q.55 a.4. This formulation is based on the English translation of *The Summa Theologica of the Fathers of the Dominican English Province* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981) (reference in Stump 2015:11).

disposed to act in a certain way” (Van Tongeren 2015:47). When you have a disposition towards something, you are both able to do it and inclined to do it, at the same time!

- “Of the mind” refers to the material cause or natural substrate in which the virtue exists. Virtues exist in and express the human self, which is constituted by reason and by passion. In the human self, there is no passion without a connection to reason, and vice versa. For Aquinas, passions are subject to reason and moved by reason (Stump 2015:8). Through reason, our virtues are oriented to truth; in other words, when we love, we are convinced that the object of our love is worthy of being loved. At the same time, reason enlightens our appetite (passions) by showing its desired object as a good (Van Tongeren 2015:50).
- “By which one lives righteously, of which no-one can make bad use” refers to the final cause of virtues. The finality of virtues is the good. In an Aristotelian ethics, the moral good can be realised through self-development. Thomas (in line with Augustine) is aware of the “brokenness” or sin of human beings, who can fail to do what is considered to be good, or even have the will to do what is evil. But no-one can make bad use of the theological virtue of love, because they have a final end in God. The final end of love has a perfectness or excess, because it is aimed at God. If a love happens that originates from God and has its end in God, it is a good without limits. The perfect good in life is beyond human self-realisation, but we can participate in it as a gift.
- “Which God works in us, without us” refers to the efficient cause that is God, who through his death works in us (Te Velde 2015:29). As stated above, the perfectness of love stems from God. But love can only be perfect if this virtue also transforms our human will. The Aristotelian virtue ethics only knows about reason and appetite (passion), but not about the human will and its defect, as introduced by Augustine. Love can only aim for the unlimited or perfect if our will is transformed by God. “In us, without us” refers to a will that is liberated from its limits or brokenness (Van Tongeren 2013:166). We are moved by love, as if it is not an act of our will. When love happens, pure passivity seems to take over. It seems as if the human will is transformed, in the sense that it is freed from its un/willingness.

We will now raise three questions. Each question formulates a perplexity which seems characteristic of the logic of love. By “perplexity”, we mean a juxtaposition of ideas that do not seem to coincide.

Firstly, can a virtue be a matter of human excellence, and also be “infused by God”? Are theological virtues and moral virtues connected, or unrelated? We align with the position that they are distinct but connected. According to Stump (2015:15) Aquinas developed a three-layered theory of moral disposition: dispositions acquired by practice; those infused by God; and gifts of the Holy Spirit. If not all levels would contribute to the art of leading a good life, why would Thomas construct a three-levelled theory?

This connectedness can be grounded conceptually by the argument, according to Aquinas, that all moral virtues presuppose love or charity (Te Velde 2015:31). The reverse too is presupposed by him: charity must be connected with the moral virtues, which are acquired through practice, in order to transform everything in society. “The infusion of grace extends through the virtue of charity to the moral sphere of the cardinal virtues” (Te Velde 2015:42). So there are strong arguments for seeing love as a theological virtue connected to moral virtues (the cardinal virtues, firstly; but ultimately to all virtues). But this results in a perplexity; namely that love is a gift of grace, and at the same time a moral disposition for which human beings must be praised, because it is the result of self-development.

A second question is: if God is the final end of love, could we ever understand this final end of what we love? As stated above, moral dispositions have an intellectual and a passionate (“of the appetite”) dimension: we comprehend love as the truth of our moral disposition, and we are filled with happiness by it – which induces an intention to act.

However, the logic of this formula leaves us with a perplexity. The truth of the love of God cannot be comprehended by reason. Can we understand what the final end of love (which is God) is? Can we understand the perfection (the excess, ultimacy and finality) of this love, which is God? On the dimension of passion (desire), several authors suggest an openness that human beings have for supernatural joy or happiness. Our desire has a transcendental openness towards a kind of happiness greater than we could dream of (Van Tongeren 2015:56). And Stump suggests that Aquinas holds a second-person concept of love, in which the beloved dwells in the lover. Aquinas states:

The ultimate perfection, by which a person is made perfect inwardly, is joy which stems from the presence of what is loved. Whoever has the love of God, however, already has what he loves, as is said in 1 John 4:16: ‘Whoever abides in the love of God abides in God, and God abides in him. And joy wells up from this’ (Stump 2015:19).

Does this suggest that joy convinces us of the presence of what is in fact love? And does this then mean that we do not understand the final end; that we are convinced by a passion that dwells within us?

Thirdly, how does love emerge, if it is not something human beings can control? What does this “infusion by God” imply for the “freedom of the will to love”? Is this the end of what we call “free will”? This issue incorporates perhaps the strongest perplexity of all: how can we think of a human disposition that we enact, without an involvement of the will? How can we presume a powerlessness to act on the basis of love, in the heart of our power?

3. HERMENEUTICS OF EVENT

The theological virtue of love is characterised by perplexity; e.g. what is the love that God works in us, without us? We think we can understand this perplexity from a hermeneutics of events. We follow Ingolf Dalferth (2016), who identifies three types of hermeneutics, based on the differences in the way in which the *intepretandum* is defined. Interpretation is a sign-process in which someone (the *interpreter*) interprets something or someone (*interpretandum*) on some basis (the basis of interpretation) in a particular context and situation (the context of interpretation). The *interpretandum* (the object of interpretation) is the object that one is trying to understand. It may be:

- either linguistic or non-linguistic texts (works),
- the authors who produce texts and the recipients who make use of texts (subjects), or
- the process of life in which producing and understanding texts is embedded (event).

Dalferth identifies three types of hermeneutics in theology, based on the guiding idea of what one is trying to understand: works, subjects or life-events. We will define the different types of hermeneutics according to the analysis of Dalferth, and argue why we think that an event-hermeneutical approach is helpful for understanding the perplexity of love.

“A hermeneutics of works understands the *interpretandum* as the product of a producer, using the actor-act model as paradigm” (Dalferth 2016, Chapter 3, Section 2). Cultural phenomena, texts, music, pictures and buildings are produced by someone from whom they are distinct. These realities can only exist because they are made by someone who has a certain intention to produce this work; but at the same time, they

have their own meaning. The intention of the producer co-determines the existence of the work, and guides the way it needs be correctly understood in the light of the original context of production.

Whether one follows the classical view of God as author of the book of Scripture or the modern view of the Bible as a canonical collection of ancient writings spanning the time of more than a thousand years, for a hermeneutical theology so oriented the central category is the meaning that is found in a particular signifier (medium) because the meaning has been given to it or will be given to it – by the author or the recipient or both (Dalferth 2016, Chapter 3, Section 2).

The second type of hermeneutics that Dalferth describes is a hermeneutics of the subject. “A hermeneutics of the subject understands the interpretandum as the self-understanding displayed within every understanding” (Dalferth 2016, Chapter 3, Section 3). In every understanding there resonates always the self-understanding of the author and the self-understanding of the recipient. According to a hermeneutics of suspicion and preconceptions, this self-understanding is present in every understanding.

The twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Hans Blumenberg have so been read and understood by many: as versions of a subject-hermeneutics that – whether by analysis of being, effective history, or phenomenology of variation – has to do with the self-understanding of people in the world, in the world of culture, or in history (Dalferth 2016, Chapter 3, Section 3).

The third type is a hermeneutics of events.

It is not the author, but the text that stands in the foreground, and indeed in such a way that neither the producer (*sensus auctoris*) nor the product (*sensus operis*) is the hermeneutical interpretandum, but rather the meaning-event of the production of the text (Dalferth 2016, Chapter 3, Section 4).

The focus is not on the producer or the resulting text, but rather on the dynamic process of meaning construction that takes place; and not primarily on the active aspects of those dynamics, but on the passive-pathic aspects.

The hermeneutically decisive question is not from whom a construct of meaning stems or what it “really” says, but rather where and how and by whom and on what grounds it is understood, which new possibilities of meaning it opens up, and which old possibilities thus

are taken up and developed or excluded as dead ends (Dalferth 2016, Chapter 3, Section 4).

What counts is the event to which the text owes its existence

and to which it bears witness through its reality as a text, as well as paying attention to the possibilities of understanding, self-understanding, and life that are set free and put into play by this event (*idem*).

Dalferth stresses that theologically, the meaning of the text reveals who I really am (that is, *coram deo*). The theological interpretandum is neither behind nor in front of the text, but the text as event in which our understanding of ourselves and the world is transformed.

Important for Dalferth is that this transformation in the event is marked by contingency (Dalferth 2016:Introduction). “Contingent” implies that a transformation is not necessary; yet it is possible, and it happens in actuality. Any reference to God retains this inexplicable contingency, and even deepens it. According to Dalferth (2016: Chapter 12, Section 1), theology is a discipline about the possible, not an ontic or ontological discipline.

The possible should not be thought of in the framework of an emergence-continuum of the real, but as a transformation of what is given through the divine power of the possible. Theology, according to Dalferth, observes the world from the point of view of the priority of the possible above the reality, through its orientation around God as the reality of the possible.

Along the same line of thinking, Cusanus argues that God is the absolute possibility². Absolute possibility is positioned neither before nor after actuality but is eternally identical, or eternity itself. Absolute possibility expresses the idea that in God, possibility, actuality and their connection (*nexus*) are identical. To understand an event from the divine power of the possible (*sub ratione dei*) is to understand it from the becoming of what is genuinely new; or what we like to frame as “the unexpected possible of unlimited value” (Hermans 2015).

2 This idea is also developed by Cusanus. In the opening pages of his *Trialogus de Possesit* (1460), Cusanus argues that God is absolute possibility. Cusanus coined a new name for God: *Possesit* (see Hermans 2002).

4. AN EVENT-HERMENEUTICAL INTERPRETATION OF LOVE

Can a hermeneutics of events, as developed by Dalferth, help us to understand the perplexity of love? Hermeneutical theology has two primary tasks: the systematic explication of faith, hope and love; and a coherent interpretation of our reality, as it is lived and experienced (Dalferth 2016: Chapter 5, Section 4). According to Dalferth, the first is well documented as a word-event, but the second task is largely a postulate. The reason that this task is not carried out, may reflect a certain theological position. At the end of this chapter, Dalferth writes:

While Scripture lends itself to being grasped and interpreted as the witness of an event of interpretation, that is not so for our experience of the world (*idem*).

From a Catholic theological perspective, we like to see nature and grace – or the event of the interpretation of love, in the world and in the Scripture – as connected realities. What we will do in this section is to give an event-hermeneutical reading of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32),³ and an event-hermeneutical reading of the phenomenology of love as presented by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2004; 2006). Finally, we will show that an event-hermeneutical reading of love can help us understand the perplexity of love as a theological virtue.

4.1. The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)

From an event-hermeneutics perspective, the beginning of this parable is very typical “And he said, ‘A certain man had two sons’” (Luke 15:11). Why this man, and not another? Why here, not somewhere else? There is a father, and something happens to him. It need not have happened, it could have happened to anyone and yet it happened to him.

For an event-hermeneutical interpretation, the radical contingency of the event is important. The meaning is to be found in the event, through which we are interpreted as human beings living with and for others. The actions of the youngest son are unprecedented. Not only does he ask for his share of the inheritance; he then sells it and spends all the money abroad, living a rebellious life.

His act is not just about money, but also about kinship and property. In the Hellenistic world, the “*oikos*” is the basic unit of society. It comprises

3 We highlight only those elements in the parable which mark an event-hermeneutical interpretation. For the commentaries, see Jeremias (1963), Evans (1990), Green (1997). We used the King James version as translation.

the house of the father, the family (social relationships), and the family's property (Park 2009). Through the act of selling the family's property, the son creates an economic problem. But he also cuts himself off from his kinship with his father; and by the same act, the father loses his role as the *pater familias* who takes care of his (extended) family.

In the scenes that follow, the situation of the young man deteriorates quickly: with no money, and with famine in the land, he sells himself to someone as a worker (Luke 15:14-16). In the Hellenised areas of the Roman Empire, this might be described as "indentured labour" (Harrill 1996). This was a legal contract in which a free person was bound "to remain with" (*paramenein*) a patron, and required to perform whatever services were ordered to be done. These could encompass anything; hence the degrading task of feeding the pigs.

Economically, the young man lives in the same situation as the poor and marginalised. This reflects the power relations of the colonial setting of society in the Middle East, in which many people lived in deprived conditions, in contrast with the ruling political and religious elite (Park 2009).

Breaking his legal contract would have led to penalties that would have made his situation even worse. And yet "he stands up" (Luke 15:18a) and decides to go to his father. This remarkable move leads to an even more remarkable interpretation of what has happened: he wants to say to his father, "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee" (Luke 15:18b). A new layer of meaning is introduced: a heavenly meaning (*coram deo*) not unrelated to his relationship with his father ("before thee"). When heaven is involved, it is possible something unexpected could happen and transform the situation.

The narrator of Luke continues:

But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him (Luke 15:20).

The dynamic that sets this heavenly meaning in motion involves capacities that are all human: seeing (mind), compassion (appetite), and action (will). Love does not *need* to happen. Thank God, it does! The father takes the interests of his son as his own interests, and gives him an identity and a status within the community (*oikos*).

By doing this, he also transgresses the boundaries that the economic system (*oikos*) imposes on people:

Boundaries of insider and outsider, the 'haves' and 'have-nots' within which our identities are contested, challenged, and often jeopardised by strife and scarcity, where death is dealt with as often as life (Park 2009:520).

In the act of compassion, a new interpretation of "*oikos*" emerges:⁴ a (comm)unity which is neither divided nor discriminatory, but a place of life and freedom for all, where all boundaries are levelled and where the real needs of people are taken care of.

The parable starts by introducing "a certain father". Why this father? Why a crisis in this "*oikos*"? Can he handle this situation? In the act of compassion (i.e. the event), the father transforms the meaning of "*oikos*", both on the level of economy and relationships and in the idea of the pater familias. New possibilities emerge which evoke an extraordinary joy for all involved. This is expressed by the ("heavenly") feast that is prepared to celebrate the new "*oikos*" which levels all boundaries (Luke 15:22-24). Love happens, "on earth as it is in heaven". A certain father becomes transparent to our heavenly Father.

Love need not happen; but when it happens, it is because of the mercy and grace of the Father (God). Thank God it happens.

4.2 The event of human love

According to Frankfurt, there are four conditions necessary for the human experience of love. We will interpret these conditions in an event-hermeneutical interpretation of the human experience of love. Can this experience present itself as a transformative event of love, in which people come to understand themselves as loving the object of their love? In our analysis, we shall use Frankfurt's book, *Reasons for Love* (2004).

Firstly, the object of our love is specific: this person, or this region where I live (Frankfurt, 2004:41). This specific object may be concrete – for instance, this partner, this child, or this region – but also more abstract;

4 Is it completely unexpected that the father shows compassion to his youngest son? Is what happens in this situation beyond imagination? The act of compassion need not happen, but it is not impossible. Carol LaHurd shows that when reading Luke 15, Arab Christian women did not consider the act of the father to be inappropriate. "The son is the father's 'own blood', and the 'loving heart of the father' forgets the wrong and the lost money, and thinks only about getting his son back" (LaHurd 2002:259). It could have just happened, of course; but from an event-hermeneutical perspective, that is not the issue. The issue is that it happened to *this* father, in *this* situation. And when it happens, it transforms our understanding of community, economy, and relationships.

social justice, or a religious tradition or spiritual ideal. This is different from more general care, for the elderly or for fugitives. One does not know if a person working in general care is willing to help this elderly person, or this fugitive.

Love does not allow for this indifference. When we love, we care about this object of our love, and not another one. Why this person? This is not a conclusion based on a causal explanation. It could have been another person. The object of our love is contingent: not necessary, yet possible – and it happened to me.

Secondly, love is “a *disinterested* concept for the existence of what is loved, and for what is good for it” (Frankfurt 2004:42). The lover wants the object of his love to flourish. There are no other interests or other goals that interfere with our love.

Loving something has less to do with what a person believes or with how he feels, than with a configuration of the will that consists in a practical concern for what is good for the beloved (Frankfurt 2004:42-43).

In the life-changing event of love, we are transformed into persons who are concerned for what is good for the beloved.

Thirdly, the person who loves identifies with the interests of the object of his love, and not just with the disposition to promote the interests of the other. The person who loves takes the interests of the object of love as his or her own interests. The lover is selflessly devoted to the interests of the other (Frankfurt 2004: 61). When the interests of the other come into conflict with his personal interests, this is a conflict between interests which the loving person considers to be his own.

As human beings, we lack the capacity to fulfil all our interests, or to endure conflicts between our interests for a long period of time. There is a limit to the suffering we will endure in fulfilling the interests of our object of love, but we long for human fullness.⁵ In the event of love, we are changed into persons who consider the interests of the other as our own interests. The question is not whether we can fulfil the interests of our object of love in an unlimited way; but the good we desire for our object of love is unlimited (human fullness).

5 For God, there is no need to forgo any opportunity for loving out of prudence or anxiety. “This love, which is understood as being totally without limit or condition, moves God to desire a plenum of existence in which everything that can conceivably be an object of love is included” (Frankfurt 2004:62).

Finally, “it is a necessary feature of love that it is not under our direct and immediate voluntary control” (Frankfurt 2004:44). Who we love or what we love is not the result of our choice. We do not choose the object of our love; it is the object of our love that has chosen us. Love is “a volitional necessity, which consists essentially in a limitation of the will” (Frankfurt 2004:46); in other words, we cannot “not love”. We are seized by the object of our love (passivity) in the same moment that we direct our will towards the object of our love (activity).

The loving person gives himself wholeheartedly to the object of his love. He cannot but love this object of his love. This “surrender” does not happen on the basis of a choice (e.g. reflective), or an act of our will (e.g. in control). Here, Frankfurt makes a comparison between the role of logic in rationality, and the role of love in the will.

When we discover that we have no choice but to accede to irresistible requirements of logic, or to submit to captivating necessities of love, the feeling with which we do so is by no means one of dispirited passivity or confinement. In both cases – whether we are following reason or following our hearts – we are typically conscious of an invigorating release and expansion of ourselves (Frankfurt 2004:64-65).

In volitional necessity as in rational necessity, the uncertainty which creeps into our willing and our thinking is eliminated. In the same event in which we are overpowered by love, we are liberated from the impediments to choice and action. We give ourselves wholeheartedly to the object of our love, and act in the interest of our object of love. What is important is that the life-changing event of love is experienced as the movement of a free will. In an event-hermeneutical interpretation of love, the event that transforms one’s life feels like a “volitional necessity”: the person cannot but give himself to the object of his love – wholeheartedly!

4.3. The perplexity of love

We now return to our questions concerning the perplexity of the theological virtue of love. Does an event-hermeneutical interpretation of love help us to understand this perplexity? We think it can, because an event-hermeneutical interpretation regards perplexity as a marker of the life-changing experience of love.

Firstly, can a virtue be a matter of human excellence, and be “infused by God”? The parable starts with a certain father in an “*oikos*”, which is gradually turned in a deep crisis. By the compassionate act of this father, this situation is transformed into an “*oikos*” in which all boundaries are

transformed. Before the compassionate act of the father, the young son formulates a confession; but it is not the cause of the compassionate act of the father. The father sees the son, is moved by his needs, and acts in his interest.

From an event-hermeneutical perspective, this compassionate love does not *need* to happen. Yet it happens. When love happens, it is a gift. Love can be considered a human excellence, but at the same time it is an unexpected possible act. From a biblical perspective, the gift has a Name, a beginning and an end (God). This gives people trust that love will happen. Thank God, love happens!

In his phenomenological analysis of love, Frankfurt stresses that we care about *this* object of our love, not any other one. Now, caring can be considered meritorious: if we care, we are concerned about the interest of the other. But love is more than this: the lover cannot “not love”. The phenomenological analysis suggests that the perplexity of the will is implied in the logic of love.⁶ We need to take care of something and at the same time we are “overwhelmed” by the object of our love.

A second question is: If God is the final end of the theological virtue of love, can we ever understand what this final end is that is God? As we said above, in the act of compassion (i.e. the event), the father in Luke transforms the meaning of “*oikos*”, both on the level of economy and relationships, and in the idea of the *pater familias*. This act opens up new possibilities – a final end, which evokes an extraordinary happiness in all involved. But this final end is not expressed in a description of the new “*oikos*” which levels all boundaries.

No; what happens is the preparation to celebrate an extraordinary feast (Luke 15:22-24). The biblical text seems to suggest that we can only understand this final end in the form of praise. In our praise, we make room for the object of our praise (God) to show Himself in his Alterity. So it is not a predictive way of defining the final end, but an opening of the heart for the future of the new “*oikos*” without limits.

From an event-hermeneutical understanding, this perplexity is characteristic of the life-changing event of love of God, but also of the love of a certain father. The happiness expressed in the praise manifest itself

6 As we stated previously, there is a difference between the biblical tradition and a phenomenological analysis of love, in the sense that the love of God is without limit. But if our analysis is correct, this is not a difference in terms of the experience of perplexity; it is a difference in terms of the degree of trust which believers can have, based on the unlimited love of God.

in the movement of the heart (will) in the phenomenological description of love. In the event of love, our heart is opening itself to the good of our object of love in a perfect or unlimited way. The question is not if we can fulfil these interests in an unlimited way; our heart is moved towards the perfect or unlimited good of our object of love.

In an event-hermeneutical interpretation of human love, we come to understand ourselves as passionately striving to act in favour of the perfectness of our object of love that wants to emerge in the future. For this transformation of the will, it is not required to know the final end: it requires a movement of the will that aims at the unlimited good of our object of love.

Thirdly, we formulated the question: What does this “infusion by God” imply for the “freedom of the will to love”? Is this the end of what we call “free will”? In the phenomenological analysis of love, we saw that love can be seen as a “volitional necessity”. It seems as if the will is freed from the burden of willing, and human beings give themselves wholeheartedly to the object of their love. It is characteristic of the meaning event of love that it feels as if the lover cannot “not love”. It is precisely this perplexity which a theological definition of the virtue of love expresses by the “infusion of God”. This volitional necessity is also characteristic for a certain father in Luke. There is no rational explanation for the compassionate act of the father: it is an act of gratuity.

5. SCARCITY

Scarcity can be defined as “a subjective sense of having more needs than resources” (Mullainathan & Shafir 2013:4). Scarcity is an embodied problem with many faces: economic, social, organisational and psychological. If you are born poor, the chances of you moving higher on the social ladder are very small. Congregations struggle with scarcity in terms of members, money and volunteers. Young urban professionals struggle with the scarcity of time, due to the speed of a life characterised by the influences of globalisation and acceleration. It is an embodied problem that reflects a mindset, related embodied practices and a context, in an interconnected way (Mullainathan & Shafir 2013).

There is no blueprint for change in instances of scarcity. Change in mindset and practice can only be found in deep transformation in the concrete settings of persons and communities. It is precisely for this reason that in this article we focus on the problem of scarcity. Deep transformation is more than “fixing the problem”; and this is where love comes in (see next section).

Scarcity can have many forms. We can distinguish between:

- Economic scarcity (poverty), i.e. the experience of having more needs than material resources;
- Social scarcity (loneliness), i.e. the experience of having more need for social contact than available social bonds;
- Organisational scarcity, i.e. having more needs than resources in terms of members, money and volunteers;
- Time scarcity (being stressed), i.e. having not enough time for too many activities.

As an illustration of what poverty means in the daily life of people of the poor in South Africa, we refer to a research rapport of the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (2017).

Since 2002, Afro-barometer has asked South Africans how often they had to go without enough food, enough clean water, medicine or medical care, enough cooking fuel, and/or a cash income during the previous year. Respondents who had access to all necessities all the time would report 'never', while those who were deprived of any of these five necessities at some point would respond 'just once or twice', 'several times', 'many times' or 'always'. [In 2015] About three in 10 citizens went without food (30%), water (31%), and medical care (29%) at least once. (...). Levels of lived poverty vary significantly by race, province, level of education, and place of residence (rural or urban). Analysis by race shows that never going without enough food, water, medical care, cooking fuel, and a cash income is most common among Indian (81%) and white (79%) South Africans. In contrast, only 28% of black and 47% of Coloured South Africans never experienced deprivation of these five basic necessities. (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation 2017: 194-195)

We will now present the three interconnected elements of Mullainathan and Shafir's (2013) theory of scarcity.

"Mindset" refers to the processes and mechanisms of the mind that occur when we feel we have too little, and how that shapes our choices and our behaviours. The scarcity mindset is characterised by both a positive and a negative process. The positive mechanism is focusing: scarcity captures all our attention, all our energy over anything else. Focusing is characterised by a sense of urgency, and heightened productivity. The negative process is one of neglect, caused by the mechanism of tunnelling. Scarcity leads us into a tunnel, so that we neglect other (possibly more important) things that we value (*idem*:28).

While our mind is drawn to scarcity, all other things are inhibited, i.e. harder to reach. We do not make trade-offs using a careful cost-benefit calculation. The tunnel magnifies the costs and minimises the (long-term) benefits. Secondly, according to Mullainathan and Shafir, scarcity reduces our “bandwidth”.

Bandwidth measures our computational capacity, our ability to pay attention, to make good decisions, to stick with our plans and to resist temptation (*idem*:41-42).

The focus on scarcity is involuntary. It captures our attention, and impedes our capacity to focus on anything else. People have fewer mental resources, and are more impulsive. They tend to focus on immediate rewards, and their willpower is affected.

A second element (next to mindset) is the patterns of practices and habits that keep us trapped in scarcity. The authors call this the “scarcity trap”. This is the process by which the “initial scarcity is compounded by behaviour that magnifies it” (*idem*:126). Two features define the scarcity trap: being one step behind, and juggling. Scarcity draws the mind towards the behaviour the person needs to avoid. If you have an endemic shortage of food, money or time, you magnify the behaviour that is causing the problem. It is like juggling, but focusing only on the ball that is ready to drop (tunnelling). You do not see the next ball that is going to drop. In your practice, you are always one step behind. And then when you see the next ball fall, you strengthen the behaviour which you should actually stop.

The third element is contextual factors (local and global) that influence scarcity. For example, our society is characterised by acceleration; i.e. we do more in less time. According to the sociologist Hartmut Rosa, acceleration is a complex phenomenon with (analytically) three different social categories: technological acceleration, social acceleration, and pace of life. Technology helps us to do more in less time. Social acceleration refers to rapid changes in social networks creating instability in social relationships. And pace of life refers to an endemic “time famine” in modern society. According to Rosa, this process of acceleration is part of a changed relationship of people to the world, in which people relate to the world as a resource (Rosa 2016).

The three elements are deeply interconnected; i.e. the scarcity mindset is a contextual outcome (rather than a personal trait) encouraging behaviour that keeps us trapped in scarcity. We sometimes like to blame the poor or lonely or dying church communities or over-stressed persons for their “misery”: they simply don’t try hard enough! In reality, the problem

of scarcity is not so easy to overcome, because of the interconnectedness of the issues. Simple solutions don't work; people fall back into old practices and habits; and the influence of the context in which they live creates alienation.

6. LOVE IN A TIME OF SCARCITY

We now come to the end of our journey. What is the place of love, defined as a theological virtue, in a time of scarcity? Do we need it? Do we need it now, perhaps more than ever? The phenomenon of scarcity reminds us of the fact that it is not easy to bring about sustainable change in the lives of people, congregations, families, etc. There are no easy solutions, no quick fixes, no blueprints. If we accept this, we might then be open to thinking that we need a completely different understanding of the mission of Christian communities (and churches) to "love the Lord your God and love thy neighbours" (Mark 12:30-31). Why? Because on the one hand, we miss the perplexity of love (or to put it more bluntly: love is a risk!). On the other hand, we miss the interconnectedness of the factors that cause the problem. Based on our line of argument, we will formulate five basic ideas for a theological virtue of love that can bring deep and sustainable change in the forms of people's social lives.

(1) What we can learn from the theory of scarcity is the fact that the problem of poor, lonely, over-stressed or dying communities is in many cases a very complex one, due to the interconnectedness of mindsets, embodied practices, and context. If we speak about change or transformation of the situation of the poor, etc., we should do so in terms of this complexity. If we don't do this, we run the risk of speaking in a naïve way about change and transformation. There is a growing body of knowledge in the social sciences about this complexity (as illustrated by the scarcity theory). Theology must incorporate this knowledge when dealing with issues of change and the transformation of people. If we do not, our ideas will be not only naïve but also too speculative.

(2) Another thing we can learn from the theory of scarcity is that we cannot expect sustainable change if the will is not transformed. Deep transformation of the will is precisely what characterises the event of love. We often think of the poor, lonely, over-stressed, etc. only as objects; it is also important to see them as agents of love. Being the object of love brings the experience of compassion and trust. When love happens in their lives as agents, it transforms them into different people. It gives focus to something which fulfils their lives, and disrupts the process of tunnelling.

(3) Do we love the poor, lonely and over-stressed? Love can happen; but it may not. Love is a risk! This is precisely what distinguishes the theological virtue of love from an Aristotelian definition, which is based on human excellence. We are seized by the object of our love as something perfect which comes as a gift. We experience it as a passion to act as if the interest of the other is our interest. And we experience this love as a volitional necessity: we cannot but love, wholeheartedly.

(4) Change or transformation is difficult because of the interconnectedness of mindset, practice and context. If we want to create change, we need mimetic spaces in which we can create new realities for the social life forms in which we live. Here, Wenger's concept of "communities of practice" could be helpful. Firstly, a community of practice is characterised by mutual engagement in a practice (Wenger 1999: 73). Love happens, but only between people who meet each other face to face. Without active engagement in a practice, there is no community. A second feature of a community of practice is the common meaning assigned to the practice. This meaning is negotiable, but in the community of practice we share a collective understanding of this practice. Thirdly, a community of practice is characterised by the development of a common repertoire of tools, ranging from stories, symbols, gestures, practices and objects to buildings and roles (Wenger 1998:82). We are inclined to call our mindset a tool. All these tools derive their meaning from their place and function in the community of practice.⁷

(5) Finally, much of our effort to bring change in the lives of people is ultimately unsuccessful. We try hard, and we are motivated by love for the object of our love, but it does not result in a sustainable change. If we want to be successful, we need to start from the specific configuration of the problem situation of the people we want to help; and together with them, co-construct a plan of action. The best approach to dealing with a situation such as this is practice-oriented research (Hermans & Schoeman 2015). It is research in which the problem owner defines the problem and the research goal. It produces practical knowledge about the changing of this problem in the context in which people live.

7 For a more elaborate introduction to this idea of the community of practice, see my book on Participatory Learning (Hermans 2003:226-230).

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