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# Rethinking Service

A lecture given at the LFP National Conference on October 20, 2012 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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## Introduction

The 1996 film *The English Patient* is set in Egypt during the Second World War. A married Englishwoman, Katherine, finds herself often alone as her husband pursues a cartographical expedition. She falls in love with an impossibly exotic Hungarian nobleman, Laszlo. Count Laszlo, another cartographer, discovers a wondrous cave, decorated with prehistoric paintings, deep in the Sahara Desert. Laszlo and Katherine fall into a passionate affair. Katherine's husband, sensing the affair, plans a murderous revenge. He puts Katherine in the back seat of his biplane and flies toward Count Laszlo's excavation camp near the famous cave. He tries to land the plane right on Laszlo himself. But the plan catastrophically backfires. It turns out it's Katherine's husband who dies in the crash. Laszlo, the intended target, sustains only minor injuries; but Katherine's badly hurt. We witness Laszlo carrying her slowly and lovingly to the prehistoric cave.

Now Laszlo and Katherine face an unspeakable predicament. Katherine's injuries are life-threatening. If she's going to live, Laszlo's going to need to go and find medical help. But that means going to Cairo – and Cairo's three days' walk away. It's a dangerous journey. Even if Laszlo gets there unscathed, there may be no one he can persuade to bring help. And even if all these ifs meet happy whens, there's got to be only a small chance Katherine will still be alive when Laszlo gets back. What are they to do?

I want you to think about this predicament as the defining question of your life. Everything in our culture, and especially our institutions of higher education, orients you towards solutions, towards answers, towards ways to fix the human body, the human mind, the world's economy, the inside of a laptop, the woes of Washington, the finances of Greece, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the poverty of Somalia, the glitches in the health-care bill. *Are you ready for a problem that doesn't have an answer?* That's the question I'm going to address this morning.

## Mortality

Let's dig down to one of the biggest questions of all. What's the essential problem of human existence? I want to dig inside this question to identify the answer most people here tonight would most probably give to the question. I want not just to name that answer, but to explore it in such a way that we can see how that answer shapes a number of things we do.

Here's my hypothesis. Our culture's operational assumption has long been that the central problem of human existence is mortality. From the moment we come into the world, our fundamental crisis is that we're going to die. In the words of Samuel Beckett, we "give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Given that eternity is rather extensive by anyone's measure, any limited life span that falls short of eternity is bound to be unsatisfactory, and three score years and ten are not inherently less adequate than a million or two: as Isaac Watts, recalling the words of 2 Peter, reminds us in his celebrated hymn, "A thousand ages, in thy sight, are like an evening gone; short as the watch that ends the night, before the rising sun." But the issue isn't simply that life is limited in terms of duration. Human flourishing is circumscribed by a host of other limitations. If we simply invoke nine, we might note disability, chronic ill health, and terminal illness; poverty, hardship, and malnutrition; adverse weather, famine, and limited natural resources. It's a formidable list. We're hemmed in on all sides not just by death but by a host of other constraints.

What has changed in perhaps the last 50 or 60 years is that, at least in the West, humanity no longer feels such limitations are integral to its existence. There was a time when death and taxes named the unshiftable givens of human experience, and that life was a largely Stoic matter of learning to live within the boundaries of limited human potential. Death took place in the home, most illnesses had little or no chance of a cure, and it was best to prepare oneself for a fragile existence or face hubristic disappointment or humiliation. The world's resources may have held enormous potential, but the technology and techniques for tapping that potential were still in their infancy. But those days have gone. A cascade of technological advance, in fields such as medicine, transport, and information transfer, has made such constraints seem absurd, rather than necessary. The human project is no longer about coming to terms with limitations and flourishing within them. It's now, almost without question, about overcoming and transcending limitations. Human contingency is to be swept aside like racist legislation during the civil rights movement. It's not something we learn to live with: it's something we expect to conquer. Doing so is part of our self-assertion, our full expression, our spreading of our wings. It's more or less become the defining project of the human race.

It seems all are agreed that the key project of our species is the alleviation, overcoming, and transcendence of mortality. We achieve this by inventing new medications, discovering new dimensions of experience, reducing or reversing limitations such as blindness, breaking athletic records, and circumventing such tragedies as famine or muscular dystrophy. That's what we strive for. That's what gains outstanding individuals rewards and acclaim. That's what our society prizes most highly.

In the middle ages the most celebrated moments were the discovery of precious documents from the classical period. Each one represented a reclaiming of a piece of and an avenue into a lost golden era. Today the golden moments are the transcending of another dimension of human limitation. When we advertise our organizations we seldom still say, "Making lead pencils the same way for 150 years." Instead we say, "Testing and stretching the boundaries of knowledge: making the impossible, possible." The single notion that sums up this sense of throwing off limitations is *freedom*, and the term we employ to commodify freedom and give it retail value is *choice*. So the basic line in promoting what we do is to say our product or service overcomes one or more of the real or perceived constraints of your daily or lifelong existence and thus gives you more choice.

Now, when an organization, such as a business or a university, wants to feel it's addressing wider human needs, and not just feathering its own nest, it encourages its members to address what it perceives as the fundamental problem of human existence. Efforts towards that end are what the church calls mission and the world calls service. *Mission* concerns God's hopes for the world, and the church's role in bringing those hopes about. *Service* is the recognition that there is a lot more to the world than the activities that yield an income, and that, however much benefit many people may derive from those activities, there are a great many more who derive little or none, and whose needs, if they are to be noticed and responded to, have to be addressed in voluntary ways.

What I want to highlight right now is that, *if you assume that the fundamental human problem is mortality; and if the great majority of your institutional endeavor is committed to creating opportunities for people to overcome the world's limitations and their own; then it's highly likely that you'll configure service and mission in corresponding terms.* You'll be upholding the Millennium Goals. You'll be providing artificial limbs for use by people in war zones who've been maimed by landmines. You'll be digging wells for people in locations where there's a dearth of fresh water. When the human problem is mortality, then this is what mission and service are: they are generous acts of reducing mortality, alleviating human limitation, in ways that are not income-generating but are nonetheless life-enhancing, for both giver and receiver.

## Isolation

So that's my hypothesis. Most educated people in our culture assume the fundamental human problem is mortality, specifically, and human limitation, more generally. But here's my argument. *What if it turned out that the fundamental human problem wasn't mortality after all? What if it turned out that all along the fundamental human problem was isolation?* What do I mean by this? If the fundamental human problem is isolation, then the solutions we're looking for don't lie in the laboratory or the hospital or the frontiers of human knowledge or experience. Instead the solutions lie in things we already have – most of all, in one another. What if the answer, for Laszlo, doesn't lie in walking to Cairo?

Let me explain this by asking a basic theological question. Why do Christians, to use conventional and familiar language, want people to be saved? An obvious answer might be, "Because those people are going to die, and maybe they'll go to hell, or oblivion, or nothingness," or whatever the latest term for downstairs happens to be. But if you say, "*And what's so great about going to heaven, then?*" what kind of an answer do you get? Heaven is, I would suggest, the state of being with God and being with one another and being with the renewed creation. In other words, a heaven that's simply and only about overcoming mortality is an eternal life that's not worth having. It's not worth having because it *leaves one alone forever*. And being alone forever isn't a description of heaven. It's a description of hell. The heaven that's worth aspiring to is a rejoining of relationship, of community, of partnership, a sense of being in the presence of another in which there is neither a folding of identities that loses their difference nor a sharpening of difference that leads to hostility, but an enjoyment of the other that evokes cherishing and relishing. The theological word for this is communion.

To explain this I'm going to describe to you three scenes that I'm guessing will be familiar to all of us. And then I want to think with you about what these three scenes have in common.

The first is your relationship with the most difficult member of your family. Let's say it's your father. Christmas is coming up but somehow you have no idea what to give him. It bothers you because deep down it feels like your inability to know what present will please your father is symbolic of your lifelong confusion about what might truly make your father happy, especially where you're concerned. So in the end you spend more than you meant to on something you don't really believe he wants, pathetically throwing money at the problem but inwardly cursing yourself because you know that what you're buying isn't the answer. When Christmas comes and your father opens the present, you see in his forced smile and his half-hearted hug of thanks that you've failed yet again to do something for him that might overcome the chasm between you.

Here's a second scene. You have family or friends from out of town coming for Thanksgiving. You want everything to be perfect for them and you exchange a flurry of emails about who's going to sleep where, and whether it's all right for them to bring the dog. You get into a frenzy of shopping and baking. You're actually a little anxious that you'll forget something or burn something, so the kitchen becomes your empire, and you can't bear for someone to interrupt you, and even at Thanksgiving dinner you're mostly checking the gravy or reheating the carrots. As you say goodbye to your guests you hug and say, "It's such a shame we never really talked while you were here." And when they've finally left, you collapse in a heap, maybe in tears of exhaustion.

Here's a third scene. You feel there's something empty or lacking in the cozy Christmas with family and friends, and your heart is breaking for people having a tough time in the cold, in isolation, in poverty or in grief. So you gather together presents for children of prisoners or turn all your Christmas gifts into vouchers representing your support of a house or a cow or two buffaloes for people who need the resources more than you and your friends do.

What do these scenes have in common? I want to suggest to you that they're based on one tiny word: it's the word, "for." When we care about those for whom Christmas is a tough time, we want to do something "for" them. When we want our houseguests to enjoy their Thanksgiving visit, our impulse is to spend our whole

time doing things “for” them, whether cooking dinner or constantly clearing the house or arranging activities to keep them busy. When we feel our relationship with our father is faltering, our instinct is to do something “for” him that somehow melts his heart and makes everything all right.

And those gestures of “for” matter because they sum up a whole life in which we try to make relationships better, try to make the world better, try to be better people ourselves by doing things “for” people. We praise the selflessness of those who spend their lives doing things “for” people. People still sign letters “Your obedient servant,” because we want to tell each other “I’m eager to do things ‘for’ you.” When we feel noble we hum Art Garfunkel singing “Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down...” – presumably “for” you to walk over me without getting your dainty feet wet. When we feel romantic we put on the husky voice and turn into Bryan Adams singing “Everything I do – I do it ‘for’ you.”

It seems that the word that epitomizes being an admirable person, the word that sums up the spirit of Christianity, is “for.” We cook “for,” we buy presents “for,” we offer charity “for,” all to say we lay ourselves down “for.” But there’s a problem here. All these gestures are generous, and kind, and in some cases sacrificial and noble. They’re good gestures, warm-hearted, admirable gestures. But somehow they don’t go to the heart of the problem. You give your father the gift, and the chasm still lies between you. You wear yourself out in showing hospitality, but you’ve never actually had the conversation with your loved ones. You make fine gestures of charity, but the poor are still strangers to you. “For” is a fine word, but it doesn’t dismantle resentment, it doesn’t overcome misunderstanding, it doesn’t deal with alienation, it doesn’t overcome isolation.

Most of all, “for” isn’t the way God relates to us. God doesn’t simply set the world straight for us. God doesn’t simply shower us with good things. God doesn’t mount up blessings upon us and then get miserable and stropy when we open them all up and fail to be sufficiently excited or surprised or grateful. “For” isn’t the heart of God.

In some ways we wish it was. We’d love God to make everything happy and surround us with perfect things. When we get cross with God, it’s easy to feel God isn’t keeping the divine side of the bargain – to do things “for” us now and forever.

But God shows us something else. God speaks a rather different word. In Matthew’s gospel, the angel says to Joseph, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” And then in John’s gospel, we get the summary statement of what the Christian faith means: “The Word became flesh and lived with us.” It’s an unprepossessing little word, but this is the word that lies at the heart of Christmas and at the heart of the Christian faith. The word is “with.”

Think back to the very beginning of all things. John’s gospel says, “The Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God. Without him not one thing came into being.” In other words, before anything else, there was a “with.” The “with” between God and the Word, or as Christians came to call it, between the Father and the Son. “With” is the most fundamental thing about God. And then think about how Jesus concludes his ministry. His very last words in Matthew’s gospel are, “Behold, I am with you always.” In other words, there will never be a time when I am not “with.” And at the very end of the Bible, when the book of Revelation describes the final disclosure of God’s everlasting destiny, this is what the voice from heaven says: “Behold, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.”

We’ve stumbled upon the most important word in the Bible – the word that describes the heart of God and the nature of God’s purpose and destiny for us. And that word is “with.” That’s what God was in the very beginning, that’s what God sought to instil in the creation of all things, that’s what God was looking for in making the covenant with Israel, that’s what God coming among us in Jesus was all about, that’s what the

sending of the Holy Spirit meant, that's what our destiny in the company of God will look like. It's all in that little word "with." God's whole life and action and purpose are shaped to be "with" us.

In a lot of ways, "with" is harder than "for." You can do "for" without a conversation, without a real relationship, without a genuine shaping of your life to accommodate and incorporate the other. The reason your Christmas present for your father is doomed is not because "for" is wrong, not because there's anything bad about generosity; it's because the only solution is for you and your father to be "with" each other long enough to hear each other's stories and tease out the countless misunderstandings and hurts that have led your relationship beyond the point of being rescued by the right birthday present. The reason why you collapse in tears when your Thanksgiving guests have gone home is because the hard work is finding out how you can share the different responsibilities and genuinely be "with" one another in the kitchen and elsewhere that make a stay of several nights a joy of "with" rather than a burden of "for." What makes attempts at Christmas charity seem a little hollow is not that they're not genuine and helpful and kind but that what isolated and grieving and impoverished people usually need is not gifts or money but the faithful presence with them of someone who really cares about them as a person. It's the "with" they desperately want, and the "for" on its own (whether it's food, presents or money) can't make up for the lack of that "with."

But we all fear the "with," because the "with" seems to ask more of us than we can give. We'd all prefer to keep charity on the level of "for," where it can't hurt us. We all know that more families struggle over Christmas than any other time. Maybe that's because you can spend the whole year being busy and doing things "for" your family, but when there's nothing else to do but be "with" one another you realize that being "with" is harder than doing "for" – and sometimes it's just too hard. Sometimes New Year comes as a relief as we can go back to doing "for" and leave aside being "with" for another year.

And that's why it's glorious, almost incredible, good news that God didn't settle on "for." God said unambiguously, "I am 'with'." Behold, my dwelling is among you. I've moved into the neighborhood. I will be "with" you always. My name is Emmanuel, God "with" us. Sure, there was an element of "for" in Jesus' life. He was "for" us when he healed and taught, he was "for" us when he died on the cross, he was "for" us when he rose from the grave and ascended to heaven. These are things that only God can do and we can't do. But the power of these things God did "for" us lies in that they were based on his being "with" us. God has not abolished "for." But God, in becoming flesh in Jesus, has said *there will never again be a "for" that's not based on a fundamental, unalterable, everlasting, and utterly unswerving "with."* That's the good news of the incarnation.

And how do we celebrate this good news? By being "with" people in poverty and distress even when there's nothing we can do "for" them. By being "with" people in grief and sadness and loss even when there's nothing to say. By being "with" and listening to and walking with those we find most difficult rather than trying to fob them off with a gift or a face-saving gesture. By being still "with" God in silent prayer rather than rushing in our anxiety to do yet more things "for" God. By taking an appraisal of all our relationships and asking ourselves, "Does my doing "for" arise out of a fundamental commitment to be "with," or is my doing "for" driven by my profound desire to avoid the discomfort, the challenge, the patience, the loss of control involved in being "with"?"

No one could be more tempted to retreat into doing "for" than God. God, above all, knows how exasperating, ungrateful, thoughtless and self-destructive company we can be. Most of the time we just want God to fix it, and spare us the relationship. But that's not God's way. God could have done it all alone. But God chose not to. God chose to do it "with" us. Even though it cost the cross. That's the amazing news of the word "with."

The cross is usually portrayed as the ultimate moment of "for" – the definitive thing only God could do that God did do on our behalf. But let's think about the cross for a moment in the light of what we've seen about the word "with." The cross is Jesus' ultimate demonstration of being *with* us – but in the cruellest irony of all

time, it's the instant Jesus finds that neither we, nor the Father, are *with* him. Remember Jesus' agonizing words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Every aspect of being *not-with*, of being *with-out*, clusters together at the foot of the cross. Jesus experiences the reality of human sin, because sin is fundamentally living *without* God. Jesus experiences the depth of suffering, because suffering is more than anything the condition of being *without* comfort. Jesus experiences the horror of death, because death is the word we give to being *without* all things – without breath, without connectedness, without consciousness, without a body. Jesus experiences the biggest alienation of all, the state of being *without* the Father, and thus being not-God – being, for this moment, without the *with* that is the essence of God.

Jesus gives everything that he is for the cause of being *with* us, for the cause of embracing us within the essence of God's being. He's given so much – even despite our determination to be *without* him. And yet he's given beyond our imagination, because for the sake of our being *with* the Father he has, for this moment, lost his own being *with* the Father. And the Father has longed so much to be *with* us that he has, for this moment, lost his being *with* the Son, which is the essence of his being. Here's the astonishing good news. At the central moment in history, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, had to choose between being with the Father or being with us. And he chose us. At the same time the Father had to choose between letting the Son be with us or keeping the Son to himself. And he chose to let the Son be with us. That is the choice on which our eternal destiny depends. That is the epicenter of the Christian faith, and our very definition of love.

From this moment we can see that the word "with" becomes the key to the whole story. The Holy Trinity is the perfect epitome of "with": God being with God. The incarnation of Jesus is the embodiment of "with": God being with us, being among us. The crucifixion, as we have seen, is the greatest test of God's being with us, because, we see that God in Christ is so committed to being with us that Jesus will even risk his being with God to keep his commitment never to be separated from us. The resurrection is the vindication of God's being both with us, and with God, and the ultimate and perpetual compatibility, and unity, of the two. Pentecost is the embodiment of that resurrection breakthrough, because in Pentecost the Holy Spirit becomes the guarantee and gift of our union with God in Christ and our union with one another in Christ's body.

## **Why Alleviating Mortality Heightens Isolation**

So you've had my hypothesis – that our culture assumes the fundamental human problem is mortality. And you've had my argument – that the fundamental human problem isn't mortality; instead, it's isolation. And I've expounded that argument by showing how in the word "with," what I call the most important word, we see the essence of what it means to be God and the essence of what it means to be human. Now, in the last part of my lecture, I want to show why this distinction between mortality and isolation is so important to the church's mission and the world's service.

It's not difficult to see how a philosophy based on overcoming mortality and a philosophy based on overcoming isolation can come into tension with one another. As humanity's quest to overcome mortality has gathered pace, the degree of human isolation has increased with it. For sure, enhanced transportation, telecommunications and information technology have made it possible to communicate in ever more extensive and complex ways. But they have also facilitated lifestyles where people are in touch with conversation partners on the other side of the planet, but not with next-door neighbors; where insurance lies in investments and pensions, rather than in friendships and extended families; and where face-to-face human interaction is ceasing to become the encounter of choice for a generation who are used to having plentiful alternative ways to make themselves known to one another. The flipside of making ourselves more independent and self-sufficient is that we are simultaneously becoming more isolated and more alone.

And this brings us to the crucial point. If you see the central quest of life as being to overcome isolation, rather than to overcome mortality, your notion of service and of mission will change accordingly. Service and mission that seek to overcome isolation don't look to technology to solve problems and reduce limitations. They don't assume that their own knowledge and skill are the crucial element required to change the game. Of course, if you're in the business of overcoming mortality, you're going to need plenty of knowledge and skill. But if you're in the business of overcoming isolation, then you begin to appreciate that concentrating on enhancing and promoting your own knowledge and skill may be as likely to be counterproductive as productive.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul cites one compelling metaphor for what Christ has done in bringing salvation. Paul says, "In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." (2:14) Paul is referring to the hostility between Jew and Gentile, but the point goes for any such degree of antagonism and alienation. Indeed, the greater the degree of isolation or antagonism, the more profound the significance of overcoming it. Thus service and mission become *recognizing those from whom one is alienated and antagonized and seeking and finding ways to be present to them*. Mission and service are not primarily using one's skills in conflict resolution to bring peace between warring parties, but instead perceiving contexts in which one is one of the warring parties and submitting oneself to a process of making peace.

The approach that sees overcoming mortality as the goal tends to approach mission and service like this. We, as outsiders to social disadvantage, and thus not, in any significant way, part of the problem, nonetheless have expert eyes to see what the problem is, and ready-made solutions to hand. We will appear in the local context, deliver our solution, and then withdraw, quickly to resume our regular activities, which are not considered to have any material bearing, positive or negative, on the problem we've identified and resolved. If we've listened and learned from repeated interventions of this kind, we'll have gathered that it's good to form relationships on the ground, good to involve local participants in some way, else local wisdom be neglected and local goodwill be needlessly undermined. But the point is that this local participation is never more than a means to an end. The end is never in question. The end always comes in the form of overcoming the limitations of the local environment or skill-base, and the provision of technology or the enhancement of the capacity to use it.

Contrast this with the kind of mission and service that emerge from a conviction that the goal is to overcome isolation. We're not exactly sure what the problem is, but we take for granted that we're a part of it. We don't assume that the solution is to make other people more like us by ensuring that they have what we have and live as we live. We assume that we have a deficiency, and that deficiency is due to the poverty or absence of our relationship with those who have important and invigorating things to share with us, if only we could open up channels to receive those things. We may well embark on projects that seek to alleviate distress or transfer resources or develop skills. But the point of these projects is not to achieve a specific material goal: these endeavors are simply means of forming relationships from a safe common starting-point. These programs are ladders that will fall away once the relationships are in place and genuine dialogue is happening. What we might call the "mortality model" insists that what's required is the introduction of new information, new technique, new technology. The "isolation model" asserts that in most cases a people or a neighborhood has everything it needs for its own redemption: what inhibits such redemption is the energy lost in isolation and wasted in antagonism.

For leaders of colleges and universities there's a curious irony in all of this. Such leaders do more to further the overcoming of isolation by the way they run their institution and by the way their institution fosters healthy relationships among its members and staff than their institution does by such service projects as it undertakes. Because in all the haste to provide technology and enhance technique and alleviate the limitations of climate

or scarcity or skill, mortality-motivated service can often underline and even enhance the kinds of social alienation that from the isolation perspective constitutes the problem in the first place.

I once was asked to do a bit of consultancy work for a college that was seeking to expand its student service programs. I talked to the board of the service initiative. "What are you looking for in the service projects you coordinate?" I asked them. "We want to see *impact*," they said. "We want to see transformation. We want to *make a difference*." Try as I might I couldn't get the members of that board to see that not all impact is welcomed by its recipients. Not all transformation is for the better, and a lot of people in the history of the world have made a difference, but not all of those differences have been beneficial ones. The kind of service that board was talking about didn't seem to be serving anyone but themselves. It didn't seem to occur to them that they might be affirming and exacerbating the social divisions and inequalities that they found.

Like many professional people they liked to use the phrase "give something back." I tried gently to point out to them that such a phrase assumed the rather problematic premise that they and the student body would inevitably and rightly spend most of their career taking something away. I suggested that perhaps they'd do better to focus on stopping taking away rather than trying to give something back. What bothered me most about the whole conversation was that here were a bunch of thoughtful, successful people, but they didn't seem to be going about giving something back with the same degree of thoughtfulness to which they'd given the original taking away that had made them so successful in the first place.

## Conclusion

In conclusion I want to return to *The English Patient*. Think again about Laszlo's choice of whether to stay beside Katherine or walk to Cairo in search of assistance. In the story, Laszlo scarcely thinks twice before he sets off on his three-day journey to find help. He has all sorts of adventures before he finally makes it back to the encampment and the ancient cave. And when he does, Katherine is very, very, very dead. Laszlo's so committed to believing that there's a solution to Katherine's agonizing plight, and that he has the solution, that he overlooks the one thing needful. And that is, being with Katherine. He's so concerned to solve the problem that he leaves her alone in her hour of greatest need.

I wonder whether the real reason Laszlo went to Cairo was because he couldn't bear to watch Katherine die. I wonder whether we fill our lives with activity and creativity and productivity because we fear if we sat still we'd go to pieces. It never occurs to any of us to think this frenzy of programming and experiencing and sampling and trying out is madness. On the contrary, it's those that lag behind or stand outside our frenetic world that we regard as mad.

What's at the bottom of all this? Let me suggest a possible answer. Our colleges and universities are colluding with, and fueling our society's attempt to construct a world that works perfectly well without love. If you've got a problem, here's a host of solutions. Come to a wonderful university, and learn how to put the world to rights. Don't you wonder how much of this is like Laszlo walking to Cairo? What Katherine needed was the man she loved to be with her as she faced the near-certainty of her own impending death. But Laszlo didn't, or maybe couldn't, give her what she needed. We're turning our world into a Laszlo society, full of products, full of gadgets, full of devices, full of techniques, full of energy, all of which make the world go round very effectively.

And the result is that we've all become Laszlo. We would all walk to Cairo rather than stay with Katherine. Wouldn't we? Yet the irony of the movie is that when Laszlo, returning to Cairo with Katherine's body, crashes another plane, and is himself horribly injured, he's found and tenderly accompanied by strangers and cared for until the point of his death. He receives from strangers at the end of *his* life the patient love he wasn't able to give to Katherine at the end of hers.

Here lies the central choice of our lives. Are we going to give in to our society's pressure to be Laszlo? Or are we going to imitate the Christ of manger and crucifixion, the God who is with us always, even to the end of time? Are we going to love, or search for solutions? That's the question at the heart of service and mission in our new century. And the answer lies with us.



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