



‘As an Emerald Is Green’

Is Christian charity hard as a crystal or soft as flesh?

Ellen Wayland-Smith

JUNE 2026

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Ellen Wayland-Smith uses words like steady, enduring, hard, and impersonal to describe charity and God’s love. Which words resonate with you? Which descriptions would you contest? What has contributed to your own understanding of a good and well-ordered love?

2. As Wayland-Smith explores, the quality of hardness is seen as inseparable from the Christian worldview: “If we want to love like God, we must love what is unlovely, what is ragged, what is difficult or even impossible to love.” Where does this hardness come from? Does it make Christianity a cross or series of tests? What parts of the Gospel story support or refute that characterization? What problems arise when we ask people to emulate an impossible love?

3. Using a short story by Flannery O’Connor, Wayland-Smith demonstrates that impersonal charity is an “immolation” or a “burning off of one’s person.” How does the negation of self and of the context of the characters’ lives show up in “A Circle in the Fire”? Does Mrs. Cope do a disservice to herself by focusing on the positives and ignoring the panic in her soul? How does her form of charity fail to help Powell and his friends? How are the circumstances of their lives being ignored?

4. Where do we see examples of impersonal charity? Is charity in the form of “ritualized pity” problematic? What are the hallmarks of organizations or people who do charity well? What would it look like to honor our distinctive selves, our limits, and what we’re capable of giving? How might being rooted in ourselves change the way we engage in charity with others?

5. Over the course of the essay, Wayland-Smith’s appreciation for the emerald changes. What is initially prized as unwavering, beautiful, and impervious is, in a different context, admired for its light. What can this tell us about the images we use for God’s love? Which qualities should we endorse, and which ones should we let go?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Susan Bigelow Reynolds, “Loving Herself, Regardless,” August 4, 2021
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/loving-herself-regardless>

Madeleine L’Engle, “Bearers of God’s Vision,” November 5, 1982
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/bearers-gods-vision>

Burke Nixon, “Listen Humbly, Argue Lovingly,” February 4, 2021
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/listen-humbly-argue-lovingly>

Oscar Romero, “The Political Dimension of Christian Love,” March 26, 1982
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/political-dimension-christian-love>