

## The Nearness of God

Romans 8:26-39

*...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Our reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans is about the nearness of God. That is what I began to realize this week as I talked with persons facing some painful and challenging realities. The word spoken through Paul's words came clearer and clearer—it is about the nearness of God in prayer, in the experiences of our lives, in the whole scope of life itself.

First, Paul writes about God's nearness in prayer. There are times we don't know how to pray. Our lives become so painful or spiritually dry that praying becomes difficult. We might say the words, but we experience no connection with that Reality we call God. Paul says that prayer is not just about what we do. We are not in it alone. God's spirit intercedes for us. God, we might say, is reaching out to us even as we reach out to God. This is at a very deep level of "sighs too deep for words." Prayer is not climbing up a ladder to God or getting God's attention. Maybe prayer at its deepest level is this wordless prayer. Maybe the deepest prayer is in the silence where we touch the reality of our inner life, with all its confusions, hurts, intense longings. Prayer is simply being aware of what is going on inside us, not trying to fix anything and not attaching to our swirling thoughts or feelings, but holding it all in compassionate awareness. This is silence deeper than words, where we touch our truest selves.

It is there that we find that God is also touching us through the spirit. This kind of praying is deep listening for God's spirit already within us. When we pray in this way, we allow ourselves to be receptive both to the real condition of our inner life, often full of struggle and pain and questions, and to God's spirit and what that spirit will say to us, will touch in us, will illuminate in us. This is praying with awareness of the nearness of God who is not some distant celestial deity somewhere "out there" or "up there," but the most intimate Reality of our lives. It is the nearness of God to the whole of creation. And when we touch the reality of this God, we touch our connectedness to everything and everyone else. In the most profound sense, we realize that we are not alone.

Then Paul writes of God's nearness in the experiences of our lives, everything that is happening to us and around us. We know, says Paul, that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." This could be taken as simplistic cliché—"Don't worry; everything is going to be fine." Well, sometimes everything doesn't come out fine. Sometimes things fall apart. Sometimes we experience enormous pain—physical, emotional, spiritual, societal. Paul's words are not meant to trivialize or diminish our very real experiences as individuals, families, and a human family.

There is something much deeper going on here. "For those who love God," says Paul. Loving God means devoting our awareness to God, giving our lives the wholeness that comes from seeking, worshiping, and honoring the divine dimension of life--God. If we are living our lives as an act of loving God, then we grow in our perception of life as a whole, as a unity in God. This awareness of the divinely woven nature of life is something apparent to young children and to us older ones when we get back in touch with the sense of wonder we were born with. Sophia Cavalletti, in *THE RELIGIOUS POTENTIAL OF THE CHILD*, tells the story of a little girl who had grown up in a home that was neither religious nor anti-religious, an educated, cultured, humane family. The girl asked her father, "Where does the world come from?" He responded with a scientific theory of the origins of the world, but added in fairness, "However, there are those who say that all this comes from a very powerful being and they call that being God." His daughter joyously danced around the room exclaiming, "I knew it! I knew it!"

Growing in our love of and sensitivity to God nurtures in us a deep way of looking at life. Nothing is separate. Nothing is "out of place." Everything is a part of the whole of this creation fashioned and being fashioned by the Source and Power of Life we call God. This enables us to receive even the difficult things as a

part of that whole, even if we struggle to understand exactly how or why. Everything is the way it is supposed to be. That is what Kaye said to me one evening during a particularly painful period in our lives, when everything seemed to have fallen apart and we felt completely out of control. How could she say that? And how could I have come to the same sense that very day myself? It is a matter of acceptance, accepting the things that happen. Not liking them. Not being glad they have happened. None of that “God has sent me this experience to teach me a lesson!” Deeper than that. It is receiving with compassion and open-heartedness the painful things, the things that bring suffering, instead of avoiding them, wishing them away, or becoming angry, resentful and blaming, which only increases our misery. This kind of acceptance is not “giving in” or “giving up.” It is the embracing of the realities of life with compassion and love.

All things work together for good for those who love God. The struggles, the pain, the difficulties are part of our lives and will always be so. There is no life that is free of suffering. Christian faith is not about achieving a sheltered life where nothing bad ever happens. It is about seeking the nearness of God even and especially in the experiences that challenge us, shake us, and call us to let go our illusion that we can control life. We may not know HOW things are going to work out for good, but we affirm the presence, the nearness of God within those struggles, those times that can be so painful. And we open to that nearness of God to then receive what is needed and what comes to us from those experiences. This calls for us to pay attention to the difficult times as well as the wonderful times.

Now Paul reaches the crescendo of this section of his letter. What can we say about all these things? What is the “bottom line,” so to speak? If God is for us, who, or what, can be against us? If God is near to us in these ways, what do we really have to be afraid of in life? If our lives are unshakably connected to God, the Source and Power of the Universe, then we are part of life that is very big and indomitable. That is the meaning of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, Paul is saying. He fully touched the nearness of God in a prayerful life, loving God with his whole being, and even though he was killed by those who felt threatened by this, his life did not end there. God’s power of new life raised him up to be a continuing presence and spirit for us, what we call the Living Christ.

Nothing in life or death, nothing in the past, present or future, nothing high or low, nothing in the whole of creation can separate us from the love of God we have seen, known, and received in Jesus Christ. God’s nearness to us and the world cannot be threatened. God’s nearness is all around, all the time. It is the source of our confidence in the face of things that we feel are going to break us.

This week, as I was with people going through very difficult things, two of the most common spiritual questions arose: Where is God in all of this? What is the meaning of suffering? When I was in seminary and for a few years afterwards, I knew a lot about those questions! I could give a pretty good theological explanation, even several, plus a bibliography! The more I went through experiences of difficulty and suffering with people as their pastor, the less I knew about where God is and the meaning of suffering. That’s because it was moving from the head to the heart, to life. We ask such questions when painful experiences and changes happen to us. When we receive the diagnosis of cancer. When we watch our child suffer. When we begin to lose and let go of cherished parts of our lives as we age and move closer to death. When such questions arise in us, we aren’t really looking for head answers. We are seeking a heart-answer, something that will help us get through the agonizing moments and days, something that will help us embrace what is happening to us in a way that will not crush us, a way that will open us to live at a deeper level.

I think Paul’s words come out of experience, not lofty theological thinking, though Paul was no slacker when it came to that. I think Paul was writing to people of faith trying to live their lives in the midst of their struggles, rejections, sufferings, and seeking to embrace those experiences as part of their lives of faith, not as something alien. And I think Paul was saying, in essence: These things are a part of our lives, even as persons of faith. No one is exempt. Yet in the midst of these things we can know that God is a near reality, not a distant and disconnected deity. God’s nearness is our comfort, our strength, our confidence. The suffering we experience, whether our own or the suffering of a human family bent on injustice, violence, and selfishness, can be embraced, accepted, and transcended or transformed. The love of God from which we can never be

separated by anything we do or is done to us can become the very heart of the way we live. We can live with hearts that are open.

Someone this week said to me, in the midst of her suffering, something like this: When this kind of thing happened before, I was so angry with God. Why would God let this happen? That's the "where is God" and "why is there suffering" questions rolled into one. But she went on to say how people had surrounded her with support, tenderness, love, and compassion. And that is how she had experienced, not the God "up there" but the God "right here," the God who is nearer to us than we realize. When we are working seriously and daily with our inward journey, we are preparing ourselves to meet all the experiences of our lives with open hearts, receiving them, whether joyful or painful, with a sensitivity to the nearness of God who loves us, who IS love.