

Chaplain's Corner – February 2017

Last month we discussed the parable of the prodigal son and how the overjoyed welcome offered by the son's earthly father is an allusion to how much our heavenly Father rejoices whenever even the most wayward of us return to Him. But what of those of us who are in the role of that earthly father, waiting for years without word from the son and not being assured that he will ever turn back toward home? Also, for many of us as well as for those whom we serve in our ministry, I am sure that there are now or have been long stretches in which we have prayed for some deliverance from adversity of one type or another and have been distressed by the silence and the sense of God being distant or even disappeared in our lives. How can we cope and carry on while feeling apart or out of touch with Him? How can we hold on to the hope that can sustain us? How do we deal with loneliness, a sense of abandonment, the uncertainty of whether our prayers are being heard when we don't see any immediate response or answer?

I think that one of the first things to consider in this matter is that we are certainly not alone, that millions of Christians over the past couple of thousand years have also experienced the same doubts and it is an almost universal experience to have "droughts" in our spiritual lives when we find ourselves lacking in passion, in a sense of closeness to God and with a firm conviction of His presence in our daily lives. Even those who have lead very successful and powerful ministries have been recorded to have had doubts at time and difficulty sustaining a sense of intimacy with God. From the memoirs of Martin Luther it has been noted that he struggled with recurrent periods of depression and "blackness" of mood that impacted his sense of confidence and Mother Theresa's personal journals that were released for publication after her death also spoke of long periods of being unable to feel God's presence at hand, even while she was serving Him in mighty ways with the poor and untouchables of India. Even Elijah, after demonstrating God's hand of power being on him as he confronted King Ahab and the false prophets of Baal by calling down fire to consume the sacrifice when the false prophets could not, he lapsed into a deep depression, ran away from the threats of Queen Jezebel and prayed that he might die, until God sent an angel to tend to him and nurse him back to health from his loss of appetite and will to live.

So while we are all in good company with respect to feeling a loss of heart at times when the trials and tribulations of this life go on and on and do not show any promise of stopping regardless of our cries to God, what then can we hold onto to keep from losing faith? It may help to remember that in these sufferings we not only share the experience with many people, but with God himself. Jesus came to the earth, grew up and lived as a common man and ultimately suffered at the hands of the very ones He loved, all to pay for our sins. In His life He came to know what it is like to hurt, to care deeply for others who don't return the love sent to them, to be frustrated, to feel forgotten and abandoned and to be both physically and emotionally exhausted. When we consider His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane we can also glimpse into His heart and see some expression of doubt as to whether the journey He was on was worthwhile, even though at the end of His deliberations He was ready to surrender to the Father's will, not

His own. He also experienced the bitter pain of betrayal by those he loved and trusted, not only Judas but also Peter's repeated denials of Him in the most desperate night of His life. Yet, He also demonstrated the power of giving without expecting immediate return or even acknowledgement of the gift, with untold harvest much later. His cry for the Father when he felt totally alone on the cross is also something that can resonate in our own hearts when we feel distant and alone and unsure of where our help will come from.

While we can draw some assurance from knowing that Christ has gone before us and experienced the full range of painful emotions that threaten to overwhelm us, even more comforting are the promises He has left with us that give a reason for the hope we have. As it is written in Matthew (28:20): "and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" and even much earlier in the Old Testament it was written: "Yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands" (Isaiah 49:15-16) and "For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall My covenant of peace be removed, says the Lord, who has mercy on you" (Isaiah 54:10). Jesus also promised that even as He departed to return to the Father to prepare a place for us in his mansion, there would be an ever-present part of the trinity remaining with us, in the Holy Spirit: "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him or knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:16-18). Paul, in his epistle to the Romans also made it clear that regardless of how far we may stray off track and by our self-imposed distancing ourselves from God, He remains faithful and we cannot be abandoned by Him or snatched from His grip and grace: "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

So what response should be seek in the face of uncertain and perilous times, when those we love and have trusted have left us or betrayed us and when we don't see a rescuer coming over the crest of the hill on the white stallion as soon as we pray for relief? Paul, the consummate theologian and practical realist also gave good advice to those who faced persecution in his day, but it applies just as well to us in our current times. We need to hold tight to God's promises and trust in His character and believe that He has a plan for us even when we are hurting in the here and now. As Paul stated: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through out Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:1-5). He also instructs us most pragmatically: "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honour giving preference to one another, not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in

hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality” (Romans 12:10-13).

It has been stated by prominent Christian counsellors who work with couples struggling in their marriages and teetering on the collapse of their relationships that love is less a feeling and more a decision. If we hold back and wait for the feeling to drive our behaviour this leads inevitably to increased distance in the marriage and a tendency to “keep score” and repay hurt with hurt. Successful marriages as well as other relationships based on the love God has commanded us to give to one another pursue tending to the other person’s needs and placing what they need ahead of what we personally want at that moment. This, I believe, is what we are called to recognize and hold onto in the midst of trials and tribulations, when we don’t hear God’s voice booming out in response to our every prayer and plea. But if we open our eyes, look at the world and those around us with His perspective, we will see many opportunities to serve Him by loving and giving of ourselves to those in need and through pouring out God’s love onto them, begin again to experience the taste of it in our own lives. Like the living water that will quench thirst forever that he promised to the Samaritan woman at the well, we can only receive that which we freely give away. May the promises that are so abundant throughout the scriptures regarding God’s unending love and grace be enough to motivate us to keep moving forward to spread His love into this thirsty land and to renew us again as we pour ourselves into others.

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