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Hope in Troubling Times: Looking for God

Rom. 8: 35-39

Howard Thurman was an influential African American philosopher, theologian, educator, author, and civil rights leader. Thurman is widely regarded as one of the greatest African-American preachers of the early 20th-century. Thurman wrote 21 books.

Thurman described the touch of The Divine he felt, often in mystical terms. In 1910, when Halley's Comet passed across the sky and terrified him (along with millions of others), Howard's mother reassured him by saying, "Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us." Thurman wrote of the experience:

"I was awakened by my mother and she asked me if I wanted to see the comet. So I dressed very quickly and walked with her out into the backyard and there it was in the sky. I saw this giant - it was near the time when the comet was almost ready to circle the sun so that it was all tail and no head. And this tail spread out in a misty fan like fashion across the heavens. And I watched this in a way that perhaps a bird must watch the eyes of a snake when he is charmed. And then I said, "Mama, what will happen to us when that thing falls out of the sky?" I did not hear any word from her, but I felt her hand tighten on my shoulder and I looked up at her face and one bit of moisture dropped on my cheek from her eye, and I saw in her face something that I had seen only one time before, and that was when I walked into her room without knocking and I found her kneeling by her bed in prayer. And the moonlight fell across her face and then she said, "nothing will happen to us, Howard, God will take care of us."

Now I have lived hard since those days, and I know that life is as hard as pig iron. I have not worn blinkers, but the insight of my mother, simple, unsophisticated, sensitive, creative, free insight is after all the ultimate words that the Spirit of

Man has to say not only about the meaning of life, but about the meaning of death. In that moment, something was touched and kindled in me, a quiet reassurance that has never quite deserted me.”

Thurman called experiences like this the “givenness of God” – the awareness of God we may have in our life through nature or some other occurrence. It is the knowledge that comes through life that God is a given. The human heart hungers to connect with the Divine, and we do throughout our lives. It is because of the “givenness of God”. These experiences, said Thurman, give us hope.

One of the traditional scriptures that I memorized as a child and continue to appreciate is from Romans 8. I often use it at funerals when a family is particularly despondent because of a circumstance surrounding the death. The reason is that it assures us that God is never far from us. Even when we cannot feel the presence of the Holy, God surrounds us. Absolutely nothing and no one can ever separate us from God.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8: 35-39

Sometimes it is hard to feel God’s love in our everyday lives, especially when chaos descends. We all experience the oughs of life. We have challenges, heartaches, frustrations, dark nights of the soul, injuries, grief, worries, brokenness, and many other times when God seems far away. That is why there are people in the church to remind us that God continues to be present for us. Those people are the love of God in action. Wherever true love is found, God is there – even when we are not aware of it (or do not realize it).

In Romans 8, there is a set of six categories that cannot separate us from the love of Christ:

- * Death nor life (existence)
- * Angels nor rulers (spiritual power)
- * Things present nor things to come (time)
- * Powers (forces, law, operating structures of reality, philosophical ontologies)
- * Height nor depth (physical space and distance)
- * Anything else in all creation (everything, which also includes personal disobedience and unfaithfulness, or feelings)

I imagine most of us who are spouses or parents have asked ourselves what, if anything, would cause us to “give up” on love. When I hear of a horrific crime, I sometimes wonder what the parents of the person – or the spouse of that person convicted of the crime have done/ thought in relation to their loved one. Do they visit that person in prison? Do they send money for the essentials? Do they accept collect calls from prison? Does their love change?

I will tell you that I had a friend who committed a felony – not a murder, but a serious crime with a gun. He was sentenced to six years in prison. His husband and I committed to visit him every single weekend of his term. We wanted to give him unconditional love and we did. Eric and I visited him regularly, especially if his husband could not go. We went through extensive background checks; trips all over the state; hamburgers out of vending machines; sitting for hours and hours in uncomfortable plastic chairs; paying bills for collect calls and sending money and gifts to the prison; and much more. We wanted to show him that we believed in him. We wanted him to know that even though he did something criminal and wrong, we still loved him. Ultimately, we wanted him to know that he was a beloved child of God. He used to quote me: “Galen, I will be the first one to testify on your behalf... and I will be the first one to visit you... and I will be the first one to kick your butt if you ever do anything like this again!”

I will be like Paul Harvey and tell you the rest of the story. Galen got out of prison early on good behavior; he joined a church and ultimately became the Chair of the Board of Deacons – an elected position, even though he was a convicted felon. He was able to get his crime expunged. He was honest with the entire

church about his crime. He was a respected and beloved member of that church, who was an usher, a deacon, and a friendly face to every person. He attended every Sunday. Unfortunately, he learned a few years later that he had cancer. Church members became his rides to chemo treatments. They held him up when he could no longer stand or drive or walk. And when he died, there was not a dry eye in the congregation.

So often, people question God's love when they are going through a difficult situation. Where is God when I feel unlovable? When I have done something I feel so much shame about? When life feels absolutely unbearable? Has God's love changed? No.

We may not always be able to *feel* God's love. And there is the rub. But it is way too big, too broad, too much to be limited to whatever we may be able to see or feel. God's love for God's children is simply there... it is here.... For us and for everyone, no matter the circumstances. Nothing can take it away from us. Not our own stupidity or mistakes or rebellion, not any selfishness or childishness or bitterness on our parts, or whatever may be the mess our hearts are in at any given moment. Nothing we could ever say or do, nothing that could ever happen to us, is any match for the reach and reliability, the fiercely protective foreverness of God's love for all of God's children.

Preaching professor Tom Long tells the story of a memorable confirmation Sunday at a friend's church. Confirmation generally involves a period of preparation designed to help young people become active adult members of a congregation, and in this congregation, Confirmation Sunday also brought an opportunity for the class to show off a little bit of what they had learned. This particular year they had memorized a passage of scripture, a section of Romans 8 that included the verses I read this morning. So, the teacher asked them all to stand up in a line across the front of the sanctuary that morning and to take turns sharing with the church family what they'd learned.

"Joe", he said, starting with the first one in line, "what separates you from the love of God?" Joe replied, "I am convinced that neither death, no life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor

depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Joe beamed, his parents beamed, the congregation beamed. And the teacher moved to the next student. “Katie, what can separate you from the love of God?” And she recited those same powerful words from Romans. However, as the question moved down the line, the congregation grew increasingly anxious. You see, at the end of the line was Rachel, a child with a warm smile and easy grace who also had Down Syndrome. There was no way she could memorize that long passage from Romans 8, could she? But the question kept moving closer and closer down the line until it finally got to her. “Rachel,” asked the teacher, “what can separate you from the love of God?”

Rachel flashed her beautiful smile and said but one word, “Nothing!” And of course, that said it all.

Resources Used:

www.imere.org/content/mystical-experience-howard-thurman

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