

Faith Beyond Belief

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Life can be hard, especially when it is beset with disappointment. Most of us know what that means. When physical health declines, when medical diagnoses become complicated, when family relationships are estranged, when the stresses of life become overwhelming, it is difficult to cope with and to even pray to God for help, because what you want to have happen may not. That's distressing when your faith is important to you.

Martin Luther King, Jr. remarked: "There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love." That speaks to why disappointment is one of the great conundrums of faith. We love and care about someone and so it's natural to believe that our prayers will be answered in ways that satisfy our deepest desires—that someone we love will be healed, that a relationship will be reconciled, that something good will occur. If it doesn't happen, our dismay is real, not only for the disappointment over the loss and suffering, but also in our confidence in God. The disappointment affects us deeply because we hurt so out of the love we've invested.

It's been said that disappointment is a form of spiritual bankruptcy, in that you realize you have expended too much of yourself in hope and expectation, so that when it fails to deliver, when you've faced a crisis of faith, the fallout from disappointment makes you hesitant to ever believe again. I've known a number of people who have gone through this experience and I've had times in my own life where I felt spiritually bankrupt. That's particularly challenging and disturbing when you, as the pastor, disappoint those around you

who depend on you to be the spiritual broker for the rich blessings of God. If you've got nothing to say, then it doesn't say much about God, does it?

One particular situation a number of years ago left me a bit bereft, wondering if my prayers were anything more than an empty hope. A friend of mine, who happened to be a parishioner as well, was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. Though the initial prognosis wasn't hopeful, Rob had a better than average chance to survive because his overall health was good and surgery was projected to remove the entirety of the tumor. Supporting this optimism was Rob's own spirituality and faith—one that had been groomed from childhood—an intuitive sense of God's presence that radiated from his eyes, vitality, actions, voice and comments.

What's more, the night before his initial surgery, Rob had a very unusual occurrence—more intense and real than a dream; a vision, perhaps, of what he interpreted to be an angel—of a brilliant being that came to him and verbally conveyed that all would be well. It was so real to him that he even felt he was wide awake. Rob was so taken by this nighttime apparition that he couldn't wait to tell me about it the next morning before he was prepped for surgery. He was convinced he was going to be healed. I listened to him amazed by his story, because the conviction evident in his voice left me convinced that something extraordinary and wonderful had happened to him. With the confluence of all these positive signs, it appeared as if he were set apart and that he, and all who knew and loved him, would be divinely blessed through this entire ordeal. The success of the surgery

only confirmed that, with the medical staff reporting back with the news that even they were surprised by how well everything went.

It appeared to be a classic miracle story—the type written about in devotional magazines. Family and friends alike were greatly encouraged and certain that we were witnessing a remarkable example of divine intervention. Prayers became even more confident, plentiful, and fervent. A spiritual awakening of sorts took place within the congregation. The church began a town-wide campaign for prayer and financial support for the family—“Ribbons for Rob” we called it—and his presence at Sunday worship, healing services, and fundraising events assured everyone of his continued progress toward a complete recovery.

But, as it turned out, it wasn't a complete recovery. Things went well for a few months, nagged only by minor complications that seemed routine. Because each one was handled successfully, it appeared to be nothing more than a nuisance, not a worry. Except they weren't. Eventually, the setbacks came on top of each other, until it was apparent Rob was losing the battle.

All along, Rob and I would chat for hours about many things, including the nature and mercy of God, the power of spiritual conviction, and how his recovery would aid and strengthen the religious beliefs of so many. For the better part of a year, this was certainly true. When the setbacks and complications started to pile up, though, it became evident that a belief in a miracle wasn't going to be enough. Hope was fading and I think everyone, including Rob, faced a crisis of faith when the oncologist recommended suspending treatment and calling in hospice.

It wasn't what anyone wanted to hear and, just a few months earlier, no one would have ever expected. I think I may have fought this more than I realized. I was convinced as anyone that Rob was going to beat this cancer—that a divine act of healing was going to take place—that so many would be inspired by his story, reminding myself of that nighttime angelic vision and stubbornly holding onto its hopeful message. Looking back, I know I wanted it to be Elijah-like where God's mercy and power was demonstrated in such a profound and dramatic display it would silence all skeptics.

But it wasn't to be. Rob died in his early forties of the cancer everyone thought he would beat. Toward the end, when Rob recognized his fate, he reminded me one day of that vision of the angel. He said for a long while he had believed that it would mean he'd eventually be free of cancer; he would be healed. But then, somewhere along the way, he realized it meant something different, something much more profound in meaning. During his convalescence he had come to meet so many people who expressed overwhelming love and care to his family that it helped him to realize that they would not be abandoned, even with his absence. People stepped up in unexpected ways. For his wife and children and his parents, all of his apprehension and worry was unneeded. They would be all right—as the angel conveyed, all would be well. As for him, he reckoned that he already had faced his demons—anxiousness and dread, pain and trauma, tears and sorrow. He had moved beyond that. Nothing could overwhelm or worry him now. He had found his peace.

As I heard this frail man convey such spiritual strength, Rob assured me, he wasn't saying this just as mere consolation for a great disappointment; in truth, he had discovered the true meaning of his faith. It had less to do with what he learned in Sunday School or in Bible studies and sermons. It was an existential discovery—how he felt his life was in God's merciful care. It was the *experience* of faith, not the knowledge of it, that now made sense to him—disappointment being something he had to go through to discover this.

It wasn't Rob's alone to discover. His family and friends had experienced and embodied the most meaningful aspects and expressions of love that he could ever hope for in life. He also realized that his life was complete and recovered from the initial trauma and worry of the diagnosis. He had come through the worst of it quite well. Since death is an inevitable part of everyone's life, he reckoned, he felt extraordinarily blessed that he had an awareness of his limitations and that through it, he had experienced the depth of feeling expressed and the value of every moment with each one in his life. He was ready to die completely satisfied with the course of his life. It wasn't a failure of faith; it was a remarkable discovery of it—in God, in his family, and in himself. Unlike before, he could truly count his blessings.

A spiritual discovery of this type is more significant than most people realize. So many calculate the value of their days by the sheer number of them—the more the merrier, as if quantity is a fair measure of quality. But, as we often find, that's not the best measure. Those who seem to have lost so much have often gained much more than people realize, for the simple fact that they have limited time to

appreciate what's most important. It's an intense reality check where every moment and every experience counts. If done well, as in Rob's case, it can lead to a sense of wellbeing and inward strength and peace that defies human hopelessness, even in relatively hopeless situations. It's faith that is discovered through experience and engagement with the limitations of human life.

In many ways, it's a *faith beyond belief*—not only because it models amazing courage and depth beyond what most of us think we have, but also because it is a trust in God that goes beyond what we've simply learned. It's no longer a faith, or trust, based on what one believes or wants to imagine about an afterlife, but rather an experience of faith in God that is directly relevant through an immediate sense of divine help, mercy, and presence—a spiritual awareness and consciousness that relaxes and quiets the spirit from worry and distress. It's a trust that everything, in fact, will be well, regardless of outward appearances.

This isn't unusual; it's the faith that is evident throughout the Bible. We often distance ourselves from the stories about heroes of the faith who have remained loyal to God through thick and thin, in the face of great suffering, martyrdom, persecution, and every challenge that life threw at them. Whenever I read through the catalogue of heroes in today's text from Hebrews, the first response is to place them on a pedestal and exclaim—"Wow! These people of faith are amazing! They are super-saints! They represent the Elijah-like faith against all odds!"

The truth is, if these characters represent genuine human beings, with blood flowing through their veins and thoughts milling

about in their heads, then they are no different than any of us, laced with the same fears, follies, and failures of anyone. Besides, didn't many of them face disappointment—hopes that initially were dashed—“commended for their faith, [though they] did not received what was promised...”? Though their stories are remarkable and memorable, their experience with faith is not beyond our reach.

Why? Because faith that is not overwhelmed by what life throws at them is faith that is lived in the moment! It is experiential and real—lived in the moments of great trial and challenge to the soul and spirit, but anchored in a trust that God's love is genuine and present and will be evident when it is needed. Faith as trust that comes to us in the moment is not based on a religious formula, nor can it be dismissed by skeptics. It is genuine and real and life-changing, precisely because it is in the moment when it is needed; it is subjective, intuitive, personal, and inward! An individual can only give witness to it when they discover it, because living life is the test of divine presence and a quieted, peaceful, observant spirit is the evidence for it.

Frankly, we have a choice in whether we'll experience such faith. It all depends on how open we are at those existential moments—how willing we are to observe, take in, and appreciate mercies that we fear are nonexistent because we're facing traumas. This is part of the irony about what pain and suffering does to the human soul: what seems so terrible and unfair can well be the greatest blessing one can receive in life!

The reason I told you about Rob today is because I view him as an Everyman—representing what spiritual faith does for a person in

the daily dramas and traumas of life. His story isn't all that unique; I've seen many other lives and I've told a multitude of similar stories where faith is experienced in the same rich and beautiful way.

That's the point. It's not just the great saints and heroes of the faith who comprehend and give evidence of God's love and presence, even in light of the great disappointments and sorrows of life. The divine mercies of life aren't just handed out to a select few of super-sized spiritual giants. Not at all. It's available to all of us if we are open-minded and open-hearted to each moment as it comes—not framing it with fear, but anticipating it with trust of what love does in the midst of life's challenges, disappointments, and especially at life's end. It's trusting in the presence of God when it's needed most and when we fear it won't be there. And when we do, then we'll be ready and will understand completely the meaning of those triumphal words in Romans:

...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.

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