

By Our Side
Romans 8:26-39
July 17, 2005

What then shall we say? If God is for us, who is against us? Frankly, it feels like many things are against us. The forces seeking to slaughter humankind and God's creation seem to be running rampant. Genocide in Sudan. Famine in Africa. Insurgency in Iraq. Political deceit in Zimbabwe. Hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean. Bankruptcy of family farms in the Midwest. Corruption in corporate America. Illegal use of steroids by athletes. Depression and despair. A growing national deficit. Global warming. It seems that the powers and principalities, both natural and human, are moving God's creation toward destruction.

It's not surprising that belief in God is often a hard sell these days. A recent poll asked people how they felt about God. In the U.S. 70% of those polled said "I know God really exists, and I have no doubts about it." Other answers ranged from I don't believe in God (2%) to I don't know and I don't believe there is a way to find out (4%) to some of the time (2%) to I am not sure (1%). In Canada 43% expressed belief in God. In Europe the numbers take a significant dive – 22% in Germany, 23% in the United Kingdom, and 24% in France believe in God.¹

Oftentimes God seems hidden to us. We do feel distant from God. We doubt God's existence. We question the goodness of God. We can begin to feel very alone, even powerless, estranged from God.

The apostle Paul knew such times as well, as did the Roman Christians to whom he wrote. He described their sufferings as hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword. In the midst of their suffering, Paul offered the Romans words of assurance. When they felt that everything was against them, he reminded them that God was working for good in their lives. When they wondered how they would cope, he assured them that God was with them. When they succumbed to weakness, he encouraged them: "God is by your side."

How do we know that God is by our side? While the storms of life rage around us, how can we truly believe and have faith?

First, Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit prays for us. Listen to that again. The Holy Spirit prays for us. We usually think of ourselves as the pray-ers and God as the hearer. But Paul says that when we are too weak to pray, the Holy Spirit prays for us. A few verses later he says that Jesus also prays for us.

How does it feel to know that someone is praying for you? Doesn't it help lift your spirit to know that others are carrying you and your burden to God in prayer? We don't feel so alone when others are praying for us and with us. If it means so much to know that others are praying for us, how does it feel to know that the Spirit of God and Jesus are praying for us? I find myself awed and humbled by that idea.

When we are too distraught to utter the pleas we wish God to hear, the Spirit prays for us. When in weariness the words simply won't come, the Spirit sighs for us, sighs of anguish or frustration, sighs of anger or pain, sighs of sorrow or loneliness. The Spirit translates the stuttering and stammering of our souls to God.

There have been times in my life when I have been so low or weary or weak that I did not have the stamina or will to pray. One of those occasions came as I neared the end of my seminary education. I had an interview with a committee of the Board of Ordained Ministry, which recommends candidates for ministry. That committee nearly voted to discontinue me from the ordination process. I was devastated. I had spent four years of college, four years of seminary, including a two-year internship, not to mention thousands of dollars, working toward ordination. The possibility of rejection was very real. I sank into depression and withdrew from my circle of support. I could not pray. There was no will, no hope. Eventually in the midst of the darkness there was a spark of light. In the stagnant, lifeless waters of my soul, there was a stirring. I believe now that it was the Spirit praying for me when I could not. The prayers of the Spirit eventually lifted me up out of the abyss until I, too, could pray again.

The Holy Spirit is as near to us as our own breath. The biblical words for Spirit also mean breath or wind. Genesis tells us that God breathed the breath of life into human beings. Every time we breath, we breathe in the Spirit of God. God's Spirit fills us. God is for us. With every breath, the Spirit of God enters into the depths of our beings and feels our joy and our pain. The Spirit knows that which troubles and concerns us. She is emotionally involved and eternally invested in our lives. On our behalf, the Spirit communicates our feelings to God, who hears, receives and heals them. Once our feelings are heard and validated, we begin to sense God's presence again. We are reconnected to God. We feel God's loving embrace. We know that we are not alone.

When the powers threaten to undo us, stop and take a deep breath. Do it now. Perhaps it is a deep breath; it may be a sigh of weariness. Let the gentle breeze of the Holy Spirit penetrate the depths of your being,

feeling your hurt and heartache, and carry it to God in prayer. Because the Holy Spirit prays for us, we know that God is by our side.

Paul gives us a second reason for believing that God is by our side. He writes, "In everything God works for good for those who love God." God is at work in all the circumstances of our lives, positive and negative. God is not the cause, but God enters in to our lives offering us the strength and courage to cope. Evil loses its power to defeat us, for even in the things that most deny God's goodness, God is present working for good.

When suffering strikes, it is often attributed to God. People respond to a tragedy by saying, "It must be God's will." This is a great misunderstanding. God is not the source of catastrophe. The misfortunes that enter our lives are not God's will.

The word also means desire. God's will is that which God desires for us, things like health, wholeness, joy, strength, and love. In his classic book, *The Will of God*, Leslie Weatherhead calls this the intentional will of God. God intends goodness and harmony for God's creatures.

Sometimes, however, circumstances disrupt God's intentions: accidents, detours, losses. When God's original design is thwarted, God continues to will goodness in the midst of changed circumstances. God responds positively and creatively to challenging situations to wrest good out of evil. Weatherhead calls this the circumstantial will of God. Even in the most dreadful situations life presents, God is by our side. God stands with us to fight the fight, to challenge the odds, to endure the struggle.

God's activity even in the midst of evil leads us to what Weatherhead calls the ultimate will of God. In spite of all evil forces and even using evil for good, God's will ultimately triumphs. Nothing can happen which can finally defeat God. God works within the changing, evolving circumstances of our lives to bring about goodness. In the end God is victorious. As Paul says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Ultimately God's will, God's desire for goodness triumphs. God indeed is by our side.

Perhaps you can look back on difficult times in your life and see a thread of blessing running through those times. Maybe you can see how the fabric of your faith was more tightly woven as a result of that experience. Perhaps a strained relationship was healed and a stronger bond formed. Look to discern the hand of God, weaving hope into despair, joy into sorrow, and blessing into curse.

In all things God works for good. God's will, God's desire, is for our goodness, wholeness, health, and strength. Circumstances sometimes derail God's intended will, but they can never defeat God's ultimate will. God is

working for good in all events and circumstances of life. God is always by our side.

A third assurance Paul offers is the fact that God is shaping us to be like Christ. Christ is one who suffered with and for others. In calling us to be like Jesus, God asks us to use our suffering to be in solidarity with those who suffer. Our life experiences enable us to relate and minister to others in profound and meaningful ways. The blessings that come out of our tragedies can instill hope in people still mired in the depths of despair. When we stand with one another to face the trials and tribulations of life, we are Christ to one another. We provide tangible, living evidence that God is on our side.

Several years ago during my internship at Temple United Methodist Church in San Francisco, I met a 21-year old mother of a three-year-old daughter. Gladys was in the midst of custody proceedings. I spent time with her and I attended mediation sessions. Knowing that I could not relate to all that she was experiencing, I called upon another single parent in the congregation. I asked Barbara to minister to Gladys, to share her own story and pain, to listen and empathize with Gladys. A unique bond was formed between those two women. Gladys was grateful for the mentoring and guidance of one who had been there. I lost contact with Gladys when I left San Francisco, but eleven years later I picked up the Bay Area Parent Magazine in San Jose to find Gladys' picture on the cover. She was the subject of the lead article. She and her daughter were living in San Jose and Gladys was helping other single parents, just as Barbara had helped her once upon a time. We are called to be Christ to one another, to suffer with those who suffer, to spread the good news that God is by our side.

We know that God is by our side when we find Christ in the presence of another human being. We know that God is with us when we stand with one another, offering a healing touch, a listening ear, a hand to hold. We know that God is by our side when someone shares our suffering and stands in solidarity with us.

Life will never be free from suffering and pain. Whether they be the result of natural forces or human action, tragedies and traumas will continue to afflict us. As we struggle to cope with the trials and tribulations life presents us, we can trust in the promise that God is by our side. The Holy Spirit prays for us, with sighs too deep for words, offering our pain to God for healing. God is at work in all circumstances of life, not causing evil, but creating good out of evil, bringing life out of death, instilling hope in the

face of despair. God is shaping us in the likeness of Christ, that we might stand in solidarity and share the suffering of our brothers and sisters. The prayers of the Spirit, God's work for God, and the solidarity of others offer assurance that God is by our side.

With this promise we can join in Paul's great affirmation of faith: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, 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."

¹ “Is there a God?”, *The Christian Century*, June 28, 2005, p. 7.

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