

"If God Is For Us" Psalm 66:1-2, 16-20; John 14:15-21

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Here we are dear sisters and brothers in Christ, you sitting and waiting to hear what I have to say on this Memorial Day weekend and I wondering if what I have to say will have some meaning for anyone here. Why do we do this? What is it that brings us back to worship week after week? Is it the beautiful music - the hymns, the prelude and postlude, the anthem? Is it hearing the word, read and proclaimed? Is it the liturgy? Is it the community gathered in which we feel God's presence in a special way? I expect for most of us it is a combination of all of these things, but I also believe for most of us there are certain parts of worship that affect us more deeply than others.

The worship of God can bring us peace and it can elicit joy. But I know that there have been times in my life, and I suspect in many of yours, when it has been too hard to come to church. After my father died, I couldn't come in here for 6 months. I was young and I knew that if I came, the music would move me to tears and I didn't want anyone to see that. I also didn't want to subject myself to those feelings - if I wasn't here I didn't have to feel them. Now that I have grown older and have walked with many people through the valleys in their lives, I have learned a few things that I would like to share with you today.

There are so many people I think of when I think of how we walk together in a Christian community - people whose faith has astounded me, who have faced tremendous battles and trusted in the deepest darkest places in their lives that God was with them, giving them strength to face each day and each trial. Connie Farrow was one of those people. Many of you knew and loved Connie and appreciated her incredible energy and love for life and people. Connie's life was not an easy one. She lost her husband very early in their marriage. At her funeral there was this amazing picture of her and her sister Marguerite wearing gas masks because they lived in a time when having a gas mask was a good idea. In all that Connie lived through, her faith in God who she knew walked with her, gave her a grace and a confidence that was a joy to be in the presence of.

When life gets hard, when we think we cannot take one more thing, it can be difficult to believe that God is for us. The thoughts come unbidden, often in the dark night when we cannot sleep or during the light of day when we just cannot concentrate on the task at hand. The very human questions naturally arise: Why is my parent suffering so? Why is everything happening to me at once? Why is my child sick? The list goes on and on. And in those moments the BIG question comes up as well. Sometimes it is just a niggling little thought in the back of our minds and sometimes it arises in glorious technicolor on the Imax screen of our lives: Why is God letting this happen to me? Why did God give me cancer? Why didn't God keep my child from the people who led her to drugs? Why is my boss so hard to work with? Why doesn't my spouse love me? Why, why, why? And those questions do nothing but add to the pain that we are going through.

Robert V. Thompson, writing in "Feasting on the Word" talks about these experiences with these words:

"What if the wilderness is that inner experience where life is experienced as arid, alone, and conflicted? In the wilderness of experience, it is sometimes hard to breathe.

Life is difficult. As the late Martha Graham, the grand dame of modern dance put it, 'Every person is an athlete of God.' Sooner or later, life requires every person to be a spiritual athlete. There are hurdles to jump over, oceans to swim, and mountains to climb. Sometimes we do not think we can make it. Sometimes it seems as if we just do not have it in us.

Sometimes, when life seems hard and impossible, we make promises to God: O God, if you will get me out of what I am in, I promise to do what you want me to

do, to be who you want me to be. O God, if you will get me out of this, I will make it up to you. I will repay you with plump offerings. I will offer you generous sacrifices." ...Then, once the storm passes, after the memory fades, we forget the vow we made.¹

The psalmist reminds us to remember to thank God and to tell our stories of how God has helped us when we come through the other side of our own adversities. And that leads me to how I understand the workings of God in our lives and why coming to this place each week is important and meaningful, not just for us but for God as well.

Westminster is a place where God is served in so many beautiful and amazing ways. It is a place where food is brought for the hungry, money is raised to feed and clothe people, where children come to be fed and nurtured, and where the family of God comes to love and support one another in the joys and trials of our lives. It is a place where we rejoice when someone who is sick is able to make it to church and where we surround those who have been gone because of illness or grief with care and open arms when they return to our community for worship. Westminster is a congregation which not only prays for those who are in difficulty but provides support in other ways. Our parish nurse and others visit people, send cards and provide rides to appointments and meals for those who need them. When we participate in these activities, whether providers or recipients of this care, we are exhibiting in tangible ways the work of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate which Jesus promised in our passage from the gospel of John. My dear friend from seminary, the Rev. Lori Schafer, describes us when we act in ways that Jesus did, as being "God with skin on." I cannot begin to tell you of all the times I have personally felt God's hand in my life through the care and actions of others. I also hope and pray that my actions, when walking with others through the difficulties in their lives, helps them to feel God's presence with them.

Linda Lee Clader speaks of Jesus and community in this way:

In the Gospel record, we see Jesus operating in community, with his disciples and with the other people he serves. The story of Jesus is not about Jesus and a single disciple, like some stories of prophets or holy men from other traditions. Jesus is present and active with groups of people – real people who sometimes struggle just to get along and other times enjoy sharing their successes, their hopes, and their questions. So when Jesus promises to be 'in' his disciples, and promises that they will be in him, it seems clear now that he cannot be promising only mystical union with individuals. Everything we know about him suggests someone operating as an active presence in a communal context."²

William Sloane Coffin, one of my personal favorite pastors and preachers, tells this story in one of his sermons:

The other day I heard of a Zen Buddhist monk who came upon a baby abandoned in the road. He picked up the baby, wept, and put it down again. He wept because the baby had been abandoned; he left it there because in his mind no one could replace the mother. It's a haunting and troubling story, and I tell it only to suggest that we might view all of our relationships as indispensable and irreplaceable. A mother and child are not one, but also not two. They are some mystical number in between. So

1 Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 2, "Homiletical Perspective, Psalm 66:8-20," Robert V. Thompson, p. 481.

2 Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 2, "Homiletical Perspective, John 14:15-21," Linda Clader, p. 493.

child are not one, but also not two. They are some mystical number in between. So also are lovers, and truly good friends. But spiritually speaking, that's the way we all ought to be together – not one but also not two.³

I believe that same “mystical union” exists between members of this part of Christ's body in the world. I see it in the way the members care for each other. There are strong friendships which have been formed within this church and those friendships sustain us. There are wonderful fellowship groups who learn and study together and who do God's work in our community in powerful ways. But I wonder, how often do we take the time to stop and think about what these relationships mean and how our work and fellowship are experiences of God with us? Do we ever take the time to realize how bringing a can of food for the food bank or a meal for someone who is bereaved are beautiful examples of being “God with skin on” for those who are the recipients of our care? I imagine we more often see God in those who help us when we are struggling but even in those moments do we realize how God is working through those people? I also want to point out that we often do these kinds of things even when we ourselves are dealing with pain and problems in our own lives.

Sometimes being faithful means that we keep doing what we know God calls us to do, even when we don't really feel God's presence or have the energy to do it. And often, that work energizes us in unexpected ways.

Mother Teresa is someone who I look at and think, wow, I cannot imagine being that faithful and doing the kinds of things she did. She must have had a special connection with God and felt the spirit's presence in her life in ways that I can't even begin to imagine. However,

Mother Teresa ... famously left her record of a lifetime of struggle – struggle with the darkness that plagued her because, for more than half her life, she did not feel the presence of Christ. Nonetheless, among Christians she has been generally accepted as a modern saint. Some consider her an even greater saint because in spite of the dark, she continued to be faithful. Even though she had not been gifted with spiritual certainty, she steadfastly pursued the mission to which she believed she had been called, and the Christian community recognized and affirmed that mission.⁴

When you are struggling, remember God is for you, whether you can feel it or not. When life is hard, remember that this family of faith is here for you, you are not alone, you are not one and with any other person here, you are not just two. Remember that the person who reaches out to you when you think you can't go on may very well be “God with skin on.” And remember that when you reach out to someone else, you are the one who represents God.

Jesus promised us we would not be alone and indeed we are not. Just as Jesus worked and lived in community, so do we. And that community – this community - is a life-giving, spirit-filling place that will be here for you, whenever you need it. Amen.

³ “Loving Your Enemy” February 6, 1983 in The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, The Riverside Years, Vol. 2., P. 7.

⁴ Clader, P. 495