

God Binds Our Broken Hearts

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

As I have lamented at length since I have been with you, for me one of the saddest aspects of modern American Christianity is this idea of a wrathful, punishing God. So many of us, regardless of our various original denominations, grow up in the faith feeling that somehow we have to measure up before we are worthy of God's love.

This notion is so prevalent that many of God's children simply leave God's house, never to return, because they feel they just don't need the punishment. Life is challenging enough without constantly hearing that we must earn even God's love by attaining some sort of moral or ethical perfection. That if we are *good enough* then God will love us.

Is this a mantra with which any of you have ever silently tortured yourselves?

And since I have become a priest in God's Church, I have continually been brokenhearted by how many people simply feel utterly *unworthy* of God's love and care and absolutely refuse to hear that the truth is otherwise.

But this coming Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, we will hear again that what God desires most is that we believe that God loves us and turn to God in all things. Isaiah speaks to God's desire for this in poetry that I personally find breathtaking. The prophet speaks of God's desire to "bind up the broken hearted" among God's people. Or as we heard last week God wants to give us comfort.

Comfort. Webster's Dictionary defines *comfort* as: to give strength and hope to, or: to ease the grief and trouble of...How long has it been since you've had an experience of being comforted in this way?

And in the little snippet from Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica that I have above, we also hear words of comfort. This small and struggling church is undergoing some very difficult times. Far from an admonishment to straighten up and fly right, Paul writes out of intense desire to fold them in the knowledge that God is with them in the midst of their pain, that above all, God has the power to bind their wounds with love.

Paul is no stranger to suffering and he talks eloquently of his own pain frequently. So, what is Paul saying? What does it mean to rejoice always; to pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances, without being in some tragic state of denial?

Could it be that Paul is telling us that the power of God's love for us is always close at hand? So close that when we stumble and fall or when the world pushes us down that God wants to come along side us in our pain. To hold us and soothe us until we can bear our own weight again?

I remember in my own life my mother gave me my first experience of this kind of love. When I came to her in tears from a scraped knee or hurt feelings she never told me to hush up or quit being a crybaby. Her first response was always to pick me up, hold me close and rock me in her arms. She would hold me this way until I could speak and then she would listen to my tale of woe or bandage the knee, being sure to blow softly on the scrape to ease the sting of the antiseptic.

And as I grew up and my wounds became more complicated, she found new ways to bind up my broken heart. She still just listened, uttered soft words of love and then she would always follow up with a phone call the next day to see if I was okay. That simple phone call held a wealth of love.

Through this kind of consistent care, she taught me that I did not need to fear falling. Knowing she was there in this way taught me that even when life was not going my way, I could still risk hope and love, because falling, while painful, wasn't fatal.

Now expand the nature of this kind of love out into God's realm and imagine the power of God's comfort.

Imagine what it means to know that far from being unworthy of such love in God's eyes that God desires nothing more than to be there for us always. This love doesn't depend on whether we deserve it or not, it just is!

We all need to be loved, soothed, and comforted in ways large and small—we do not outgrow this human need. God has already made us worthy of God's love. When we claim this unassailable fact, our whole lives become a song of celebration and thanksgiving—no matter what!

As the rest of our Sunday reading says, *"May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this."*

Trust in God's love for you. God is faithful and God will bind your broken hearts.

Wishing you a Joyful Advent, Stephanie+