

KNOWING GOD

Rev. Gail Williford

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(Fifth Sunday after Pentecost)



ST. PAUL'S

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Lectionary Texts:

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; and Mark 6:1-13

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

²I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. ³And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – ⁴was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. ⁵On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

On this Independence Day weekend, we are faced with the strange story which the Apostle Paul brings us from 2nd Corinthians of a direct experience he has with God. Some think he was describing his conversion; others believe that he was describing another of his on-going encounters with the divine. No matter its timing in Paul's life, this experience was profound and life-changing as are any relationships with the holy. Paul, the erudite scholar, did not just know *about* God. He actually *knew* God.

In a conference here in Houston in April, Benedictine nun Joan Chittister claimed that as a child, she knew God to be mystery, a concept that resonated within her inner spirit. But later, she revealed tongue-in-cheek that her religious education taught her everything about God except God's zip code. We sometimes settle for thinking we understand God when what we crave is an experience of God. We hunger to encounter the divine.

Recently I had the opportunity to be on a retreat led by Paula D'Arcy. An international speaker, author, and psychotherapist, D'Arcy experienced an immense tragedy as a young woman. She, her husband, and toddler-aged daughter were driving from their home in Connecticut back to her family in Massachusetts to tell her folks that she was expecting another child. On their way, a drunk driver crossed the median in the highway and crashed into the D'Arcy vehicle at a high rate of speed. In the days that followed, Paula lost both her husband, Roy, and her 21-month-old daughter Sarah. She and her unborn baby survived somehow. This horrible experience was the crucible from which D'Arcy battled first for her sanity and eventually for meaning to and for her life. That she was able to recover, to grieve, to give birth to her second daughter Beth, and to go on with her life is a series of miracles of God's presence.

On the retreat, which was a profound experience for me, Paula spoke of the outer life we all live, what she called our small story. In this realm, we toil throughout our lives. We play roles. I am a minister, you are a business person or a doctor, a lawyer, a molder of children at home, a student, a professor, a government worker, and so on. We are husbands, wives, children, parents, sisters, brothers, co-workers, clients, patients, consumers, etc. We think we are what we do and how we act, but in reality, we are all much more than any of these roles. It is in this outer life that the ego necessarily has control. It tells us if we are right or wrong, certain or uncertain, ready or not. It is the world where "me, my, I" hold sway.

The task of life, in particular the 2nd half of life, according to D'Arcy and mystics and sages throughout history, including Carl Jung, the Apostle Paul and Jesus, is to go deep within. It is there that we encounter God. It is there where faith

and truth and silence endure. It is where God is. We are to be born again, born anew, born from above as Paul was, to enter and live in this inner realm. It is where we find the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven with its pearl of great price. It is here that we find love.

During the retreat, I had the opportunity for a one-on-one conversation with Paula. A very old pain had arisen in me during the retreat. The name of one who had done great harm to me had surfaced. All my life I have wrestled with forgiveness. I have heard dozens of sermons, read books, agonized over this topic and never had it made sense. I knew I could not forget the misdeeds done to me, but I didn't know how to forgive. So I went to Paula to ask her about forgiveness.

She listened to me intently and expressed her understanding and sorrow for what I had encountered long ago. And she said all she could do was tell me the process she had gone through to forgive the drunk driver who had killed her family. She settled in and with intense focus relayed her journey.

Early on after the accident, she sat with others who ranted and raved about the killer, who roared at the injustice of it, who railed against the system which had released him. She too was angry and stuck in her pain. But she realized that she could and would live the rest of her life angry, unless she took another course. From Native Americans she knew that a word once spoken goes on forever. She began to look at her words. At first, she prayed fervently that she have the will and grace to no longer speak of the man in angry terms. Her speech changed; she no longer railed against the driver. Then she realized that she needed to control her thoughts about him. Again she prayed for help. When people started to talk about the accident or the cause of it, she left the room. Her friends and family became angry at her because she no longer joined in the vitriol. But she persisted.

In reading a book by Anne Lamott, Paula came across a vignette. Lamott had gone to visit a friend who was dying of cancer. Preoccupied with herself, Lamott absently asked her friend, "Does this dress make me look too fat?" Her ill friend looked back at her, saying, "Anne, you don't have that kind of time."

Paula realized she too had a life she wanted to live which she didn't want to be wrapped up in the pain and agony caused by an irresponsible person. Eventually she asked God's help to forgive the man who took the lives of her husband and daughter.

Seven years later, she was in a courtroom where she faced the killer of her family, the man who dashed her hopes and dreams, who took what was most precious to her. By happenstance, they were alone in the room. Instinctively she knew this man was the one and she walked toward him. They stood eyes locked.

Her gaze beheld another human being, a soul with hopes and dreams and failures and losses of his own. She did not hate him, she realized. "I forgive you," she murmured. And in a flash, she felt herself in the presence of God. She was wrapped in God's loving embrace and saw clearly that it did not matter what the man did or thought or said or believed, she was freed of the burden of hating him. For the first time, she voiced to herself the phrase she never thought she could. "I'm so glad I'm alive." And she knew she would live and love and thrive as she had not known before.

"Forgiveness is an inner job," she revealed. "It comes from knowing God, not from knowing *about* God." It must originate not in our small story, our ego-driven life, but in our deep, inner world within. What D'Arcy knew, the Apostle Paul knew. We must know God, we must experience the divine. Intellectually comprehending about the holy doesn't get us to the experience that undergirds and empowers our being. May we go deep within. Let us pray that God will accompany us on that journey to true interdependence. Amen.