

The Road Less Traveled – June 23, 2017

*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*
- Psalm 51:17

When you become a parent, you learn something about hope. There is the hope that your children will have it better than you did, the hope that your children will avoid some of the mistakes that you made, and the hope that your children will somehow avoid much of the pain and disappointment inherent in life. There exists in every new parent an incredible desire to shelter and protect, but ironically, it is a feeling that is tempered over time.

Though we always grieve when our child is hurting or disappointed, we eventually begin to see the importance of such things. We let go of the bicycle seat, knowing that they may fall, but also knowing that it is in the falling that he ultimately learns balance. We resist the urge to take over the school project that has been put off until the night before it is due because we know that within the painful struggle to finish it, she likely will find the discipline that will carry over into countless projects in the future. These are lessons that are most definitely harder on the parent than on the child, and yet, they are the lessons that the child will remember the most. Indeed, they are the lessons the child eventually will share with his own children.

At the time, however, the lessons are no doubt difficult ones for children. They may wonder how a parent could stand by while they fall or flounder. “If they really loved me, they wouldn’t let this happen to me ...” Sound familiar? I wonder how many times God has heard the same thing, how many prayers have been uttered in the midst of brokenness or pain. “God, if you really loved me ...” And yet, the Psalmist reminds us that it is in the midst of that brokenness that we truly find God. It is in the midst of that brokenness -- when there literally is nothing left for us to do for ourselves -- that we finally turn to God in earnest. Does God want us to have broken hearts and broken spirits? Not in so many words, I suspect. What I know of God tells me that God grieves whenever we grieve and laments our sufferings, just as parents suffer along with their children.

No, I suspect the Psalmist’s words get at something a little deeper. It is the idea that God patiently waits for each person to come earnestly seeking to be in relationship with God. That seeking can come in many different forms, but most often it comes when the person finally becomes aware of the limits of his or her power. Life may spin out of control, crises may descend, relationships may be broken, and it is in the midst of this that one realizes that we aren’t meant to do life alone. In the end, I think that’s what the Psalmist is really getting at. God loves a broken spirit because it is in our brokenness that we turn back to God. We fall off the bike, and in falling, realize that we truly do need that guiding hand on the seat after all.

In truth, brokenness doesn’t come easily to us, does it? We live in a world that tells us that we should be able to do it alone. And yet, God calls us to not only accept our brokenness, but to embrace it. Is it because God loves suffering? Hardly. More likely it is the promise that in the embracing of our brokenness, God embraces us.