Spirituality
Soul Seeing



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"This is all part of God's plan — we just don't understand it."

Everything inside of me rebelled when I heard these words uttered from one friend to another at the memorial service for his 20-year-old son. Jacob had been hit by a car and killed while crossing the street that summer. I just hugged my friend tightly and said nothing as he struggled with the tears. Tears that made me cry as well and hug him again. He had no words he could say. Neither did I.

"God only takes the pure, good ones, because they should not have to suffer the hell that is this world."

That one was said by one of Jacob's 20-year-old friends, trying to make sense of this loss that made no sense at all. And yet, the entire service had been people talking about how wonderful Jacob's life had been, how full of promise, having overcome some of life's hardest obstacles, excelling in school, receiving a letter of acceptance into a nursing program within a day or so of dying. Jacob's life hadn't been hell. It had been filled with friends and family, beauty and promise, and now it was gone. That was the hell.

The two pastors leading the service talked about how last summer Jacob had accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior, and how wonderful that moment was because now we were assured of his salvation. I thought to myself, what if this horrific accident had happened before that moment, would we be any less certain that Jacob was held within the love that is God? There were subtle implications that if we wanted to see Jacob again, we too better accept Jesus — using tragedy for subtle threats and manipulations. I wondered, "Is this comforting to his parents? His grandparents?" They chose these ministers. Perhaps this is what they believe.

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I thought, if I had preached this service, I would have told the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel and walking away with a limp. I would have said that I am wrestling with God right now, not understanding how such a thing could happen. I would have said that it is okay to wrestle with God; it is part of our tradition. Sometimes there are no answers. Sometimes we walk away, our faith somehow intact, but we will always now walk with a limp.

When Jacob crossed that road and was struck by that car, I can only believe in a God whose heart was the first to break, a God whose heart knows the same pain and sorrow in that specific death that my own heart knows.

The reality of grief is the solitude of pain, the feeling that your heart is in pieces, your mind's a blank, like poet Lord Byron wrote, "there's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away." We speak in my liturgy class about a phrase used by Fr. Louis-Marie Chauvet, "the presence of absence." When the absence is palpable, you feel it in the room. I feel the absence of Jacob present in the room; not the absence of presence, but the presence of absence. God is present. Love is present. Jacob is present, even in our loss. Even in the excruciating feeling of his absence.

But I did not preach. And I did not have words, because all of these words that ran through my head during and after were inadequate in the face of a grief that swallows you whole. I only had tears, and could hold on tightly but could not speak as my throat closed up. I find myself grateful for that silence.