

Never Beyond the Reach of God

Joan flew to Cedar City, Utah to see her daughter and son-in-law, Allison and Pete. Late in August, they had moved there, and Pete had begun a new teaching position at a local school. Allison had not yet found a job, so besides unpacking their whole household from boxes, she was also seeking work.

Since Allison was struggling with the move, Joan decided to go and spend time with her daughter. Tearfully, Allison had told her mom that Pete was working long hours, and she was home by herself feeling alone, missing family and friends. Joan, like many parents, felt the need to reach out and help her daughter.

Is the feeling Joan had, the need to reach out to her child, even her adult child, to help her in a time of need, anything like what God feels for us? We are, after all, God's children. When we feel alone, far away, sad, and are struggling with life, does God have the same desire come and be with us to help us?

So, with this question in mind, today we will consider the first son in the story Jesus told. You know, the son who outright said, "No," to his dad's request to go and work in the vineyard. The same son who later changed his mind and did exactly what his dad asked. I think Jesus has a sort of fondness for this rebellious child.

Why do I think this? Well, because at the end of this story Jesus connects this child with the tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners, who at one point in their lives said, "No", to having a relationship with God, but who after following John, the Baptist, and now Jesus, have changed their minds.

Now these sinners are flocking to Jesus, to have meals with him, to be forgiven their sins, to be healed of their diseases, to have their demons cast out, and to be assured that God loves them. Now these people others look down upon, are trusting and believing in Jesus, and seeking out relationship with God.

I find this story refreshing and beautiful. What it says to me is no person is ever beyond God's reach. It says to me God is like a parent, who when he sees one of his children struggling and in need, has this overwhelming desire to go to them, to reach out to help them. It seems God never gives up on us.

I counseled a young man, Darin. He was 17 years old and had much trouble with alcohol and drugs. I am not a someone who is trained in chemical dependency counseling, but he came to see me because he was feeling far away from God. In fact, he felt worthless, and certainly not worthy of God.

One morning I found him asleep on the grass near the church. He had been drinking and had not wanted to go home and disappoint his parents one more time. I brought him into church and my office, gave him some water, and called his Dad. His dad came right away to the church, and his mom a little later.

We talked for a while, and I brought them into the sanctuary. There we prayed for God to help release Darin from his addiction to alcohol and drugs. Mom, dad, and Darin were in tears. There was no anger, only love and hugs, and a commitment by everyone to work together. It was an awesome experience.

Why did it go so well? After we prayed, Darin's dad confessed to his son his own previous struggle with addiction. Darin never knew when his Dad was in college, he had gone to counseling for alcohol addiction. Now in a moment of sheer grace, Darin felt he was not beyond hope, and he could change his life.

So, Darin, with God's help, did change his life in the years to come. I think he was able to do this because his parents and God reached out to help him in his most desperate hour of need, and he was healed. Darin found out God loved him, God was not far away from him, and that he is never beyond God's reach.

One of my favorite Bible verses comes from Psalm 25. They are verses 6-7. As I read them, listen for the word "remember":

Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways.

According to your love remember me,
for you, LORD, are good.

This is the needy plea of the sinner, the child of God, who finally understands how much he or she needs the Lord. Maybe this person has at one point said, "No", to God, the Father, but now wishes to change his or her mind, and have a relationship with the Lord. So, this person's prayer is about remembering.

It is remembering that God's compassion and love for us is eternal. It is remembering that God forgives the sins of youth, as well as the sins of the present day. It is remembering that God is good, and God loves us. And it is remembering that no person, including each one of you, is beyond the reach of God.

This is true if you are a tax collector, prostitute, or guilty of some other sin. It is true if you are struggling with addiction or suffering from some sort of abuse. It is true if you have cancer or some other difficult illness. And it is true if you have moved far away from home and feel lonely, sad, and miss family and friends.

You are never beyond the reach of God because God always wants to reach you. Like Joan getting on an airplane to be with Allison, God comes to you, to stand with you in your life, to help you with whatever you are facing, and even to wait for you if you are not quite ready to say, "Yes," to a relationship with him.

And God is waiting for you. At the end of our first reading today, after it talks about Jesus and his death on the cross, it says this:

Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father.

To me this means we are never beyond the reach of God. Like a parent who will go anywhere for their child, God will go anywhere and everywhere to have a relationship with you. Exactly how far will God take this? God will search for you to the ends of the earth and God will wait for you until the end of time.

That means we are never beyond the reach of God. Not even a coronavirus pandemic can get in the way. So, say YES to the Lord today. Orient your heart and mind toward his mercy and grace. Say YES to this God who loves you, this God who even if you are saying NO to right now, is reaching out to you anyway.

Amen.