

Where Is God When It Hurts?
What Good Is God? by Philip Yancey, Part I
 2 Corinthians 1:3-11
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One day in August of 2005 I was attending a retreat held at the Dominican University in San Rafael. We had some personal prayer time during the day, when we were free to roam around the campus, where I'd never been before. I entered the empty chapel—there's something about Catholic colleges and retreat centers—the old stone chapel, the smell of incense, and the quiet—it all drew me to a lit candle at a small altar. Beside the candle, there was a note that read, "In memory of Brother Roger." I knew right away who Brother Roger was, the monk who founded the ecumenical community of Taizé in France, the place where our Taizé music comes from. But I didn't know Brother Roger had died. I prayed for him at the candle, and I prayed for myself in sadness, feeling like I had lost a friend, though of course I had never met Brother Roger. (I have never been to Taizé.) But I have read his writings and sung his songs. I felt like I knew him, and I was stunned to learn in this private and mysterious way—all alone at a candle in a stone chapel—that he had died.

When I got home I went to the computer and learned that Brother Roger had been fatally stabbed by a woman with a mental illness during a service of evening prayer in Taizé, France that week. He was 90 years old and still leading worship. One of the quotations by Brother Roger, which lingers beyond his time on earth, is the simple thought, "All God can do is love"

("Human Kindness, a Reflection of God's Goodness," http://www.taize.fr/IMG/pdf/cahiers10en_web.pdf).

When someone dies at 90 years old, it's not a terrible tragedy. But to have this kind, gentle brother die by someone stabbing him during worship while he was singing and praying, that was tragic. We might ask ourselves, "Can God not prevent such tragedy?" But Brother Roger had said, "All God can do is love."

Another tragedy came along two years later, at Virginia Tech, when a Korean student by the name of Seung-Hui Cho shot and killed 34 students and then shot himself. The attacker once again was a person with a serious mental illness.

Philip Yancey, a journalist and bestselling author of more than 15 books, with 14 million copies sold, wrote a book *Where is God When It Hurts?*, and because of that book, Yancey was invited to speak to the students of Virginia Tech after their tragedy. He arrived in a neck brace, having just been in an auto accident. He faced a crowd of 1200 students sitting in utter silence before him in their shock and grief. He certainly had no quick fix. —But he talked about suffering. He talked about Columbine High School, where two students killed 12 classmates and a teacher and wounded 23 others. He talked about the shootings of Amish children at Nickel Mines, and he talked about Auschwitz and 9/11. And then he talked about his own accident when he broke his neck. Strapped to a body board, afraid for his life, all Yancey could think of was "Who do I love? Who will I miss? What have I done with my life? Am I ready for what's next?" And in his speech to the students of Virginia

Tech, he concluded that amidst all the grief and suffering there remains one thing: God's love.

All these tragic events of recent history cause us to ask, "Where is God when it hurts?" Where is God when an earthquake and tsunami hit Japan? In Yancey's book, *Where is God When it Hurts?*, his answer is that God is with the people suffering wherever we are—that's where God is when it hurts. God is with us in our suffering. That is why God sent his Son to suffer and die for us, that we might not be alone in our suffering. That is the same conclusion the Amish community had come to right away after their tragedy, when 10 girls were lined up by a disturbed man and shot in the back of the head as if they were being executed in their own schoolhouse. The Amish response was surprising in the media. They were willing to forgo vengeance and instead granted forgiveness to the family of the killer, who had committed suicide. They did not pardon the wrong, but said their response of reconciliation was a first step toward a future that would be more hopeful (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amish_school_shooting).

Hope is the key here. We ask questions in our crises, and just as we ask the questions, we answer them. Like when Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, to whom can we go?" And then Peter himself said, "You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69). Peter already knew the answer to his own question. He was desperate because Jesus was not going to live much longer. Yet, Peter already knew the message of hope, and when he said, "We have come to believe," he really had already turned the corner of his despair.

We turn the corner of our despair in times of crisis when we cry out in desperation to God, "Where are you, God?" and then answer for ourselves, "Oh, yes, I remember, you are here with me. That's why I'm talking to you, after all."

As a community of believers, we remind one another, "Remember? God is still here with us through it all." This is the gist of what Paul was saying in his letter to the people of Corinth: "Blessed be...the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God." This is a one-sentence definition of the Christian community. Because God cares for us, we care for others. "Console," here means literally to testify on someone's behalf at a trial. God encourages Paul and his friend Timothy, who then encourage the Christians of Corinth. They stand up for each other. Think of the cross with the vertical piece representing the relationship of love between God and humanity, and the horizontal piece representing the relationship of humans reaching out to other humans in love and service.

Sometimes just knowing that the church cares about you makes a huge difference. Betty Freitas told me that this week. In the hospital, before the surgery and before the tests were complete, she said, "I am so happy that I have the people in the church."

Before I was a minister, when I was nearly nine months pregnant with our third child, Leslie, I was vacuuming, something you do rather slowly at nine months, and the telephone

rang. I turned off the vacuum cleaner and went to the phone. It was my mother and she said my grandmother had died. I called Jim, and then when I hung up the phone, I just stood there, like I was frozen and didn't know what to do next. I couldn't just go back to vacuuming... I picked up the phone and dialed my church, and I told the person in the office that my grandmother had died. She listened and seemed to care. I hung up the phone and then I started to cry. It was like I could begin to grieve because I felt this immediate support all around me; I could cry that my grandmother would never hold the child who was about to be born, her great-granddaughter. Somehow by calling the church, it felt like the whole congregation of people surrounded me. Later the minister called me back, but really my own call to the church allowed me to connect with the body of Christ and feel held up in prayer. I just knew that my church cared. I knew I was not alone.

Our family was in Colorado one summer. We hiked in a beautiful area called Snow Mass. The wild flowers were everywhere, and I was introduced for the first time to the exquisite flower called columbine. Before that point, Columbine meant only the sight of a high school massacre in 1999. But, of course, the original meaning was the wildflower, Colorado's state flower, the Rocky Mountain Columbine, and the high school in Littleton, Colorado was named after the flower. What irony that such a beautiful purply-blue and white blossom would become the symbol of fear and violence in the schools.

At Columbine High School the town came together to care for one another—unlike at Virginia Tech, where the end of the school year separated the students from each other and the community. Everyone scattered and the healing was more difficult.

When tangible care is not available, we rely on the knowledge that God loves us in times of crisis. We rely on the cross, as a symbol of Christ's suffering. Paul Tillich insists that we accept suffering as part of the human condition, and yet that we affirm that suffering is not *all* there is. We say yes to life and live with hope of a life with meaning, even after suffering, and even in the midst of suffering (in *Suffering*, by Dorothee Soelle, 107). After all, the cross is not only a symbol of suffering; it is also a symbol of resurrection.

In the book, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, Yancey tells of a woman named Claudia who was diagnosed with cancer of the lymph glands. Different people from the church came to Claudia's bedside with different well-meaning notions. A deacon came suggesting that surely Claudia had done something to displease God; that she should ask for forgiveness. A cheery woman came with flowers and happy stories and laughter. Another visitor prayed for a faith healing. Still another suggested that Claudia should be grateful that she could suffer as Christ had suffered. None of these visitors helped Claudia. They made her angry and very sad and very alone. Claudia's suffering made Philip Yancey write his book, on the quest to find where God is in the midst of suffering.

His answer came in the realization that the world is imperfect. There is a great deal of unfairness and pain. There is crime and violence and disease and poverty and earthquakes and tsunamis. *And yet*, there is also God. And God is love. And human beings can give that love to one another and be present for one other, so that no one should have to suffer alone.

Where is God when it hurts? In places like Virginia Tech, or in Sendai, Japan, or in the suffering of our own families, where there is also love. God cannot take away the pain, but God gives us the strength to endure and find meaning in life, in spite of the pain. Like Brother Roger said, "All God can do is love."