

Thanksgiving Reflection

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul asks, "What can separate us from the love of God?"

That question is as important to us today as it was for the first Christians. *What can separate us from God?* What makes God seem distant, far away from our lives, our daily struggles and tasks? What pushes us away from God? What harms our relationships, leaving us feeling alone, on our own, without God's support or presence in our lives?

St. Paul goes on to observe, "Can tribulation or distress, or persecution, or famine? Or nakedness, peril or sword? No – in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

That's true. You and I are not bullied, threatened, tortured or intimidated away from God. No one is trying to force us to not have faith in God. No power or force on earth separates us from God. And yet...we can be separated from God.

We can live with the absence of God. We can feel our lives empty of God's presence, God's Grace, God's love and support. We can know the weight of a life lived without God, totally on our own, without God's guidance and purpose for our lives.

If outside forces in our world do not separate us from God, then what does? Jesus gives the answer in our Gospel from the Sermon on the Mount. *What separates you and me from God?* In a word – *worry*. Anxiety for your life. Anxiety for the food you eat, the clothes you wear, and the life you have to live. Worry about your health, your wealth and your well-being.

Worry isolates you from God. The more you worry about yourself, the further God seems from you. There is the saying, '*the more you have, the more you worry*'. Indeed.

I read in Time Magazine that there is a correlation between wealth and lack of belief in God. The percent of people making more than \$75,000 a year who believe in God is almost half of that of people with less money.

'The more you have, the more you worry'. This separates you from God. But don't be quick to blame possessions or wealth. It's not having wealth that is the problem; it's the focus on wealth that can bring anxiety.

It's also true: *'The less you have, the more you worry.'* No matter what your economic state, anxiety is near at hand. The natural human tendency to worry about money is shared by rich and poor alike – money itself cannot cure our anxiety.

What separates us from God? Worry and anxiety. We focus on ourselves – on the very things we cannot control (our life, our well-being) and we lose touch with the only one who can provide focus.

"Which one of you," Jesus asks, "by worry can add a cubic to your height? Or by worrying can add an hour to your life?"

Anxiety is foolish and accomplishes nothing except to put God out of the picture. It is self-destructive and far from adding value to your life, it takes it away. Ironically enough, doctors now tell us that worrying actually shortens life.

The Greek philosophers pointed out that anxiety actually increases anxiety. "No one confine his unhappiness to the present." Anxiety and worry, Jesus taught, take us away from God. What threat and tribulation, torture and outside forces of evil cannot do, *you and I do to ourselves*. With worry, we separate ourselves from God; we lose sight of God's love and the help God's grace and presence can bring to our lives.

Let's consider the other side – what brings us closer to God? What can we do to draw near to God? To increase our sense of God's presence in our lives? How can you and I walk closer with God? How can you know God in your life? And know His benefits and love and support?

I know what you are thinking, "Don't worry. Be happy."
Simple. Yes?

Don't worry –there! Problem solved!

Have you ever tried to stop worrying about something? You can't. You can put it out of your mind but it creeps back in through another door. It gnaws at you and sneaks into your thoughts. It shows up in your dreams; you live distracted. To tell someone to not worry is like saying, "Your glass is empty, so just empty it out." You can't eliminate a negative, like 'worry', with another negative – 'don't worry'. This isn't like the mathematical principle of "two negatives make a positive".

What can you do to overcome the worry and anxiety that separates you from God? How can you draw closer to God? In a word—Thanksgiving! (Were you wondering if I was ever going to speak about Thanksgiving?)

St. Paul writes, "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer...rejoice with those who rejoice." St. Paul proclaims to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice."

In order to escape fretfulness one must look elsewhere. According to Jesus, the elsewhere is upwards – toward our heavenly Father. It is faith that has the power to exorcise anxiety. The scripture proclaims, "Cast all your anxiety upon him, for he cares for you." I Peter 5:7

"Blessed be the Lord, day by day." Psalms 68:19

"If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow thrown into the oven, will he not much more care for you? You heavenly Father knows your needs, but seek first God's Kingdom...all you need will be yours as well."

A Christian Preacher from the first century wrote, "Although the Father is in heaven, his arm is not too short to reach earth. God graciously stretches down to care for us on the earth."

"God does not need anything, and the believer only needs God."

Thanksgiving brings us closer to God and enriches our lives in every way. The art of giving thanks turns our attention outward toward the only one who can help, who can drive all worry and anxiety away.

We turn our attention to the one who adds cubits to our height, years to our lives, and fills our daily living with blessings upon blessings.

The Psalmist proclaims, "I will give thanks to the Lord for all his benefits to me."

Which is a better life for you and me? One filled with anxiety? Or one filled with thanks? Thankful people look to the joys, blessings, gifts and bounty that fill their lives. They look on the bright side of life. Thankful people never walk alone through this world; they are surrounded by God's grace and love. They reflect that love and bounty in all that they do and say.

Who would you rather be with? An anxious, complaining, crabby person? Or someone thankful, joyful and a delight?

And so we give thanks, always remembering God's benefits.

In Philippians we read, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice. The Lord is at hand; have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayers and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Amen.