

GOD'S DISCARDS
ROMANS 8: 26-39

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University Church of Chicago
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You probably have rarely, if ever, heard a sermon preached in this form -- a story. When I preach a story sermon, people frequently ask, "What was the point?" The answer is: the story itself is the point. Stories have a long and rich history in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Jesus was a rabbi, and rabbis often taught in the form of a story or a parable or a legend.

John Dominic Crossan says that we have "domesticated" the parables, made them into sweet little Sunday School lessons. But, if one really pays attention to a parable, she is likely to say, "I don't think I understand it, but what I do understand makes me not like it."

He goes to the Fifty-Seventh Street beach every day and stands looking out at the lake. He usually arrives about two o'clock in the afternoon and sometimes he stands for hours. Most of the time, particularly during the summer when people are swimming and sunning and strolling along Lake Shore Drive, he stays for fifteen minutes or half an hour. The man is in his forties, balding, graying around the temples. His body is trim, almost too thin; his large gray eyes seem to search the lake as he stands there every day, looking eastward. The summer regulars at the beach have grown accustomed to his daily appearance. The passersby on the drive, the kids from the Museum of Science and Industry, the runners and walkers on the drive respect his anonymity.

But I know him. He used to be one of my best friends. We've grown apart over the years and while we are cordial, even jocular in social settings, there is between us a tension that is almost palpable. It's not because of Tommy, the man who goes to the lakeshore every day. It's because of the woman for whom he searches.

Her name was Judy. She was Tommy's first wife. She was one of the most compassionate, selfless people I have ever known. Judy was my friend, my colleague, a person I could trust. Like Tommy, I still grieve for her, but for entirely different reasons. When I think more clearly about Judy, I realize my grief is based on regret. I am a connoisseur of regret. Incidents, words, actions, dreams of long ago bounce into my consciousness daily.

I remember a holy man in India who sits in a chain he has forged over the years. Friends come to feed and care for him because he is bound in a chain literally of his own making. Every sin he contemplates, every evil thought, every regret means that he forges another

link in the chain that is wrapped ever more tightly around his emaciated body. He sits there along the dusty main street of the village near Alahabad bound by his regrets. When I think of Judy, when I remember the terrible hole she left in the lives of all who loved her, I feel bound like that Hindu man.

When Judy died, I was chained to her memory forever by my regrets. What word could I have spoken, what gesture of friendship could I have made, what token of encouragement could I have given, what action could I have taken to prevent her from drowning? That is indeed what she did? I don't go to the lakeshore every day, but I will tell you that every time I drive south toward the museum or have to go to the university, I almost suffer an anxiety attack. I cannot break the chain of memory.

Tommy stands there every day. He's unaware of the speeding cars, the passersby, the biting winter wind or the summer sun. "I keep expecting her to come out of the water in that lovely two-piece bathing suit she was wearing that day," he told me over a quiet dinner in Greek Town one night, "and smile at me and wave and say, as only she could, 'I'm back!' But she never comes."

All we have is a note Judy left with her clothes on the beach that day seventeen years ago. It was folded neatly inside her jeans pocket. "I have lost my way," she had written in that tiny script that all her friends knew from her voluminous thank-you notes, words of sympathy and encouragement. Anybody who knew Judy for very long would have received a note of some kind, and anybody who read that final note would have known that only she could have written it.

"I have lost my way."

When the police questioned some people who were swimming that day at the Fifty-Seventh Street Beach, they remembered Judy. Some of the teenagers recalled that she had been wearing jeans and a sleeveless blouse, that she had come to the beach and looked out at the water for a long time, then removed her clothes and stood there in the two-piece black swim suit. After a while, she had begun to swim in a straight line eastward, going farther and farther into the lake. One of the kids had said to another as he glanced over his shoulder a few minutes later, "I think that woman is going to swim to Michigan."

We questioned the same kids, the same adults, Tommy and I did. He was her husband and I was her best friend. He loved her in a passionate, romantic way and I loved her as a colleague, someone with whom I worked and a person I intensely admired. We asked hopeful questions, wanting an answer that would tell us that, yes, Judy had turned around and started back for shore, or they had seen the currents, the wind drive her southward toward South Shore. But nobody was willing to answer that way. They only

told what they had seen: that she kept swimming and nobody saw her head go under the waves, nobody saw her return, nobody paid much attention. That's the way we are, isn't it? Locked into our own needs, we forget to watch and care for each other.

"I have lost my way," the note read. But suicide notes don't ever tell those of us who are left behind the reasons one takes one's own life. Because death is too unexplainable under the best circumstances and suicide wells up from anger and grief and depression and hopelessness in ways that words can never express, the notes are at best inarticulate and give only small clues.

Judy had lost her way. The day she swam away from us, she had walked to the Fifty-Seventh Street Beach from the University of Chicago Hospital where she was being treated in the psychiatric ward. After a series of miscarriages, after her dissertation committee had pounded her pretty hard about her research and after suffering through some major losses of self-esteem, Judy had fallen into a deep depression. She had been doing better, seemed to be responding to treatment and anti-depressant medications.

But that afternoon, following a quarrel with her father who had flown in from Dayton and said in effect, "Judy, get over this!" she asked for a pass at the psych ward desk. The nurses and doctors didn't know about the angry confrontation with Mr. Essex and Judy was one of those people who can smile engagingly without revealing the falseness of the feeling projected. So, she walked to the beach, stood looking out at the lake, removed her outer garments and began to swim.

Every time I think of Judy, I remember that incident in Our Lord's Farewell Discourses in John's Gospel. As a matter of fact, when Tommy asked me to speak at Judy's memorial service, I went back and re-read that passage. Do you remember Thomas, the one we call The Doubter? I think he would be better characterized as Thomas the Candid, because he speaks what the rest of the Twelve are afraid to say.

Jesus is telling them that he's going away but they know the way where he's going. I can just see Thomas raising his hand and interrupting, "Lord, I don't know about the rest of them, but I don't have a clue what you're talking about. How can we know the way?" Whereupon Jesus tries to reassure him even further: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life...If you know me, you know God. You have seen God [in me] and you now know God."

And then Philip chimes in. He wants to be shown. He's not satisfied. At that point Jesus gets testy: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still don't get it?" Well, Our Lord's a little gentler than that but you get the idea.

Judy and I used to talk a lot about the indifferent, even hostile world we live in. Or at least I talked about it and she listened. She had lived a pretty sheltered life in a bank president's family with two older sisters to smooth the way for her. It was a kind Brady Bunch family if you looked at it from outside the home. But, as Tolstoy said in the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina*, "All happy families are alike, but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion." Judy went to church for the same reasons a lot of people do: to get spiritually recharged, pumped up. But like most of us, she lived strongly attached to a shifting assortment of possessions, projects and plans: things to own, things to do, things to dream of accomplishing. She married a good man she met in college and life seemed serene. But it was secular and boring and mystifying. I'm one of those Christians who has struggled with God all my life. The French philosopher Rene Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." But Soren Kierkegaard put it more in my terms: "I struggle, therefore I am." I tried to tell Judy about my doubts but it was only when her neatly constructed little world began to fall apart that she could hear me.

I remember talking with her about God's promises. It was a few days before she disappeared, died, swam out of our lives, whatever she did. We had a hard time even planning a memorial service. Because her body never washed up on shore, we held out the hope for a long time that she would indeed turn up, that somebody might have kidnapped her from another beach when she came back to shore, that a passing boat might have found her out there in the lake, that somehow she might be over on the Michigan shore suffering amnesia. Finally, after Tommy resigned himself that the note was indeed not just a cry for help but a suicide note, we came together, her family and friends, to weep and sing and pray. And try to remember God's promises.

So when I went back to this Farewell Discourse, I looked at the promises. Jesus doesn't simply reprimand Philip and Thomas for their unbelief. He understands their doubts. Kierkegaard talks about Abraham and his struggle with God's command to kill his only son Isaac. He says, "He left one thing behind and took one thing with him: he left his earthly understanding behind and took faith with him -- otherwise he would not have wandered forth but would have thought [God's command] unreasonable." Jesus knows that the sacred is more often than not concealed within the secular.

But Jesus doesn't leave it there. He promises an abiding place with God. He promises that there is a sure and clear way to God. He promises power to do even greater things than we can imagine.

Let me tell you something true: I have prayed and prayed about Judy's death. I have sought meaning, I have argued, pleaded, begged God to help me understand. Like Tommy, I keep expecting her to come back. Living in this uncertainty, this not knowing is the

awful part. Oh, I know rationally that she did drown out there somewhere in Lake Michigan. But in my fantasies, in my heart, I keep hoping that she will turn up, grayer perhaps, disheveled maybe, but still the same vivacious, energetic Judy.

And when I pray, I follow Jesus' command. I pray in his name. To pray in his name is not to close the prayer with a formula or to use it as an authorization to get whatever I want from God. To pray in Christ's name means, among other things, to be thoughtful about what I pray for. And to pray about what to pray.

"I lost my way," said her final note. If ever words spoke to me, they are those. I lose my way all the time. Don't you? It's too easy to get caught up in just the daily stuff of living: those lists I make, those meetings I attend, the people I love, the things I try to do to be more productive, to live a "better" life. In doing all those "secular" things that mask the sacred, the ineffable, the truth, the real get shut out, diminished. I lose my way.

I lose my way more dramatically than that, too. Stupid choices send me down the wrong path, decisions that hurt others. Wide, broad, beckoning streets that seem to be paved with gold turn seem to lead into cul-de-sacs, back alleys, dark and foreboding places of dread. How did I get here? I ask.

"I lost my way," Judy wrote. And yet she believed in, lived according to the example, gave herself to the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. My prayer, my hope is that when she began swimming out into the lake seventeen years ago she swam toward home. I am confident that the One who created her and loves her more even than Tommy does, more than I do, has helped her find her way.