

“Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him.” Really? Are you sure? Like all of you, I have asked God for things I have not received. This school year, I worked hard and applied to Northwestern. I did everything you’re supposed to do: I studied hard in all of my classes. I threw myself into extracurriculars, from the literary magazine to Latin Club. I sang in choirs and took voice lessons and spent weeks at music programs every summer. I slaved over SAT prep books and took dozens of practice exams. Come fall, I spent hours upon hours alone at my desk editing my essays and alone in a practice room practicing my songs. Unfortunately, I wasn’t accepted. Like most teenagers, I was heartbroken and angry. Now, four months later, I’ve just returned from a fantastic trip to reevaluate my two top choices. They’re both wonderful and I’m sure that either one would be perfect for me. But their acceptance doesn’t soften the initial sting. I’m certainly not the most pious among us. I can’t claim to have perfectly kept God’s commandments and teachings, so maybe that explains why God didn’t give me what I asked. But I don’t think it is.

In this congregation alone, this congregation filled with kind, generous, devoted Presbyterians, we have faced failure, financial trouble, heartbreak, illness, and loss. Truly good people in Syria and Nigeria, West Philadelphia and Camden, devoting their lives to God and to prayer, are left hungry and wanting in homes ravaged by war and violence and greed. Even the most righteous among us do not receive everything they ask from God. How do we remedy the realities we see in the world with the promise of the Bible? I’m afraid we can’t. We see that the hungry have not been filled with good things and the rich have not been sent empty away too often believe this. So what? Is God cruel? Does God want us to suffer? Or perhaps more startling to consider, is God powerless to intercede on our behalf?

Having wrestled with this, I simply can't believe that God is impotent. God has all the power in the universe. That's the definition of God: a perfect being. And a being cannot be perfect without absolute power. So why does this omnipotent God allow such awful things to happen? Sadly for us, God's role isn't to open doors for us, to ensure that our lives are safe and warm and happy. Would that it was. No, while God could do those things for us, God doesn't because the world just can't work like that. To quote the Rolling Stones "you *can't* always get what you want." Instead, God's role is that of parent, shepherd, friend. God's job is to be with us through the trials and hardships the world throws at us and to make sure that we are never, not once, not even for an instant, alone. As John tells us, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." God is not the hired hand but rather care for us and love us as a shepherd does his flock. We are not alone because God never leaves us. "The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us."

The spirit? Glad as I am to know that the spirit is with us, I confess that that power confuses me. This power isn't the same as the mighty hand of God nor the sacrifice of Christ. So what is this spirit then? David Eagleman's book *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlife* gives forty different accounts of God and what happens after death. In one, he describes a sorrowful, mourning God. God here has the power, the capability, to help his children. But unfortunately, God knows the complexities of human affairs and cannot assume the role of arbiter of all mortal things. God wants to help us but is bound by God's own prescribed role in the natural order. These ideas changed my life and bring us back to that pesky spirit. Perhaps the Spirit of First John is what God can give us, his children, in our time of need. It is not a promise of happiness, success, or even that our most basic needs be met. Rather the role of that Spirit is the love of

God, made manifest to us even after Christ died on the Cross. But what does that love like? How do we know that God is there?

For a lucky few, that love is clear and omnipresent. Perhaps even some in this Congregation have the blessing of always feeling the spirit of God moving inside of them. I confess, however, that I am not one of these people. Nor, I'd guess, are many of you. For me, finding God's Spirit that apparently is ever with me is like a constant game of whack-a-mole. The moment I seem to have located and felt it, it disappears again into the recesses of my consciousness. Finding God's presence with us, however, is not a matter of waiting. We cannot simply go about our lives day in and day out and hope that one fine morning we will wake up with Christ on our shoulder. We cannot stare at our computers and our iphones (or flip phones in Brian's case), going through each day as an unquestioning part of society and expect to find God in the next level of tetris. No. Just a few weeks ago, we remembered that Christ laid down his life for us on the Cross and was raised up to heaven. So too, if we can ever hope to know God's love, must we also lay down our lives for God. For "this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters." It's our responsibility to go into the world and allow that Spirit to make itself clear to us and others.

Going into the world here is not a metaphor. We are called to leave the confines of this sanctuary and our homes and head down the avenue. More than writing a check (which is always appreciated), we must be physically present to faults of this world in order to let God's perfect love live. We are called by Christ to serve at Our Brother's Place, to hold vigil at Delia's Gun Shop, to spend the night with the homeless at NPHIN. Christ dined with tax collectors and cared for the sick. So too must we. By engaging with the world, we will be able to share God's love with those less fortunate than us. Those who do live in terror and violence that is unimaginable to

our Chestnut Hill selves. Moreover, by allowing God's love to work through us to help others, we also help ourselves. A few years ago, before her passing, Brian and I visited Betty Roberts in Abington Hospital. Betty had just broken her neck and was in a very uncomfortable brace. This misfortune aside, the moment we stepped into the room, it was clear that something powerful was at work. Betty, despite not even being able to turn her neck to greet us, was smiling and in high spirits. Friends, if anyone has ever tapped into God's love within them, it was Betty. In that room there was an intangible. Though all Brian and I really did was show up and say a prayer, crack a joke, hold her hand, our mere presence gave Betty a feeling of God, a reminder that she was not alone. Not only was she not physically alone but she wasn't spiritually alone either, but God was with her.

I get it. It's the 21st century. We all have soccer practice, work, homework, housework...Choir practice. We can't give up every moment of our days to heeding God's call. Nor do I think would God want us to abandon our families and our responsibilities. But just because we have a big meeting during the vigil at Delia's gun shop doesn't mean that we can't do anything. Here's the good news: God can work through us with the little things. Sitting with the kid by himself in the cafeteria. Calling a relative you haven't spoken to in a while and really listening. Trying our very best to not judge those who are different than us and love them as God loves them. These bring so much of God's love into the world, revealing the presence that is always with us but oftentimes seems silent.

Though the little things are easy to pull off, I can't deceive you here. Our presence didn't change the course of history. Betty Roberts died not a few days after Brian and my visit. There are people in Syria who will spend their days praying and serving God, spreading his love with their words, their beliefs, and their deeds. And yet, this won't change the reality that their lives

could be cut short at any moment. So what's the point? It's not the easiest answer or the one that helps us sleep at night. It doesn't solve crippling hunger or unjust violence. But it's there. Laying down our lives for God doesn't guarantee that we or anyone else will receive everything we want or even everything we need. But instead, each time we are our lives we are transformed from our selfish mortal flesh towards an embodiment of loving sacrifice. And that transformation, gradual and incomplete as it may be, makes the Kingdom of God known to believers and nonbelievers alike. And this is our charge: to fill the world with God's love and presence, not to get rewards or even rid the world from evil, but to perpetuate God's love. We are given but this one short life to live and we must use the gifts which we've been blessed to give meaning to others, in the small moments and the large, furthering the Love that knows no bounds. Such that despair becomes hope, isolation becomes companionship, fear becomes trust, hate becomes love.