

A woman I've known for 17 years  
has endured more serious medical problems than anyone I've ever met.  
Betty lost her husband to a heart attack about 20 years ago,  
leaving her to raise four children by herself.  
Her personal history growing up has left her emotionally burdened,  
far beyond what most of us bear.  
She is hospitalized right now  
and her prognosis is more grave than ever before.  
Today her condition remains critical.

Two nights ago I went to visit her and although she is unable to speak,  
we were able to communicate and pray together.

When I left her bedside the other night, I realized that my goodbye  
might be the last one I say to her.

Later that evening I was on the phone with one of her sons and he said,  
*"You know, Father,  
after all my mother has suffered and lived through,  
I don't understand how she still has such deep faith in God."*

I understand.

And St. Paul words today might help us understand Betty's faith:  
let me paraphrase today's passage from the letter to the Romans...

*Will anything separate Betty from the love of Christ?  
anguish or distress? loss of a loved one?  
doubts? loneliness? depression? chronic illness?  
anxiety, multiple hospitalizations? fear of abandonment?  
No, in all these things Betty has conquered overwhelmingly  
through Christ who loved her.  
For she is certain that neither death nor life,  
nor physical pain, nor the depths of despair,  
nor any other creature can separate her from the love of God.*

But don't misunderstand or think Betty's faith is simplistic.  
Like her medical history, Betty's faith journey has traveled a rocky road:  
ups and downs; questions, uncertainties, doubts;  
seasons of hopefulness followed by seasons in a spiritual desert;  
anticipation and experience of spiritual healing  
followed, often soon, by the need to pray for healing  
again and again and again...

Yet, in all of this, one desire above all is important to Betty:

her desire to know God and to know God's love for her –  
even when it seems, and she sometimes fears,  
that God has forgotten her name...  
But even through her most difficult times,  
Betty has not forgotten the Lord's name  
but rather has called on him, in faith,  
again and again and again...

Thursday, the day I visited Betty, was the feast of Saint Ignatius.  
Reading about him I came across this in his writings:

*The goal of our life is to live with God forever.  
God, who loves us, gave us life.  
Our own response of love allows God's life  
to flow into us without limit.  
All the things in this world are gifts from God,  
presented to us so that we can know God more easily  
and make a return of love more readily.  
As a result, we appreciate and use all these gifts of God  
insofar as they help us to develop as loving persons.  
But if any of these gifts become the center of our lives,  
they displace God and so hinder our growth toward our goal...  
So we should not fix our desires on health or sickness,  
wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one.  
For everything has the potential of calling forth in us  
a deeper response to our life in God...*  
(Saint Ignatius' First Principle: paraphrased by David Fleming, S.J.)

That's how it was for Ignatius.  
And that's how it is for Betty.

Ultimately, no pain or loss keeps her from desiring to know  
that God loves her  
and in everything, even in her pain and loss,  
her desire to know God's love endures.

Betty didn't start out with some amazingly deep faith.  
She started out with average faith (maybe the size of a mustard seed)  
faith which has grown and deepened through all her trials  
because "*everything has the potential of calling forth in us  
a deeper response to our life in God.*"

Those aren't easy words to live by, but in an unexpected way,  
they may be easier to follow in distress and difficulty  
than in success and prosperity.

Ease of life can lead us to forget that true happiness  
is not in the gifts we may have,

but in our relationship with God who gave them to us.

Hard times strip us of our distractions  
and leave us naked before God who is the source, the reason,  
the goal of our existence.

When I first visited Haiti I asked the question Betty's son asked of me:

*"How can these people who suffer so much,  
these people still waiting for the banquet promised the poor in Isaiah,  
how can these people have such deep faith in God?"*

A wise woman gave me the answer when she said,  
*"When God is all you have, you believe in him very deeply."*

If the wisdom of that answer puzzles or escapes us,  
perhaps we have allowed the many gifts we have in abundance  
- or our desire for them -  
to displace God as the center of our lives.

We all have a tendency to think that we don't have enough.

The disciples in the gospel story  
thought they didn't have enough bread and fish to feed so many.

But they brought the little they had to Jesus  
who made of their *want* more than enough for *all*.

*"For everything..."*  
(the little we have - and even what we don't have)  
*"has the potential of calling forth in us  
a deeper response to our life in God."*

Consider how little we bring to this table:  
some unleavened bread and a decanter of wine.

Of these meager gifts the power of the Spirit  
gives back to us the body and blood of Christ,  
the only begotten of God, the savior of the world.

In our simple gifts, we find the sacrament of our life with God.

May the sacrifice we offer here  
nourish in us a hunger, a desire  
to know God's love for us  
and for life forever with God.

- Rev. Austin Fleming