

THIS WE KNOW

Funeral meditation for Chris Yoder

Romans 8:25-28, 31-39

The sudden and unexpected death of Christopher Yoder, has,
as one would assume,
plunged his parents, his brothers, and their families
into the experience of raw grief,
into a space where deep disappointment, sadness, and agony,
somehow coexists with an equally deep love, trust, and hope.
It has pulled them, *not* of their choosing,
into a place of profound mystery and paradox.

And those of us who knew and loved Chris,
those of us who know and love
Lawrence and Shirlee and their family,
have been pulled into those places with them—
places of grief, of hope, of mystery.

There is so much we don't know.
So much that remains hidden to us.
So much that compels us to ask unanswerable questions.

Like . . .

Why does such deep human suffering go on and on and on,
without God intervening to stop it?
How is it that a young man's heart and spirit
can so deeply desire to be whole,
while his mind and body remain so fragmented, and disordered?

There is so much we don't know
about schizophrenia and other mental illnesses . . .
about the working of the human mind,
and just about . . . the ways of God in this world.

There are some kinds of questions for which
we won't find easy answers in the scriptures, or anywhere *else*.
These are the questions we must live with, must struggle with.
Perhaps for the rest of our days.

There are many *other* people in this world
living with the *same* sort of questions, day after day.
There is so much pain and suffering and evil in this world,
that simply must go unexplained.

This afternoon as I open the pages of scripture,
I don't open them looking for words to explain this tragedy to us.
I don't open them to uncover the unknowable.
I open them to remind us of what we *do* know.

So, based on the words of scripture,
based on the stories of faith passed on to us,
and confirmed by our experience in this world,
today I wish to proclaim what we know.

This we know . . .
Christopher Jonathan Yoder was close to the heart of God.
I don't make that statement lightly.
We know it to be true.

This truth is proclaimed in scripture over and over and over.
Perhaps it is summed up best in the words of Psalm 34:
"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit."
We serve a God who is not removed from suffering,
but, in fact, draws especially close when there is suffering.
Chris was close to the heart of God.
Of that we can be confident.
Chris was in many *different* ways, broken and crushed.
So I trust completely the words of the psalmist,
that Chris remained, ever and always,
close to the heart of God.

Even when God seems far removed,
even when God seems utterly silent and absent,
we are persuaded by faith,
we are persuaded by the psalmist and other biblical writers,
when they say
"The Lord is near to those whose hearts are broken,

and whose spirits are wounded.”

The psalmist goes on to say,
“The Lord redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.”
The Lord redeems the life—
that is, the Lord returns full value to the life—
of those who seek God, who look to God for refuge.
Nothing is lost. Nothing is wasted.
Nothing is removed from God’s attention and grace.
Nothing is separated from God’s love.

One of the best-loved passages of scripture, and rightfully so,
is the end of Romans chapter 8.

That text is rich with meaning, rich with comfort.
In so many different ways, and repetitive ways,
it says that God is on our side, *unequivocally*.
Even when we’ve run out of words,
even when we can no longer pray,
God’s Spirit intercedes for us,
with deep sighs of divine compassion.

This we know. This we *know*—
there is nothing, but *nothing*,
that can tear us away from the love of God.
The apostle Paul was over-the-top in his confidence of that.
“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness,
or peril, or sword?”
“No! Of *course* not!” the Paul declares.
“In all these things we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us.
For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,
nor height, nor depth . . .
nor schizophrenia, nor addiction, nor depression,
nor disordered thinking,
nor any other kind of illness or disorder—

physical, mental, or spiritual—
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Of course, I added a few words there, but Paul would have approved.
I think my words are included in “*anything else in all creation*.”

This we *know*.
Chris Yoder was, and *is*, close to the loving heart of God.
Nothing could separate him from that love.
And where the love of God is, the power of God is.

Yes, Chris was suffering deeply.
More deeply than I think any of us can imagine.

Especially in the last several years,
he was tormented, at times *constantly*, by voices,
by entities that were entirely real to him,
that spoke disturbing, demeaning, dehumanizing thoughts.
These voices seemed intent on destroying anything that remained
of Chris’ self-worth.
Day in and day out.
I cannot imagine the depth of his suffering.

Whatever you think about the origins and causes of schizophrenia,
and these voices and entities Chris would hear,
and the darkness and confusion that would envelop him,
it’s clear that this illness attacked *not* just one organ, the brain.
It attacked the whole personhood of Chris—
mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual.
It took what God created whole and orderly
in the personhood of Chris
and over time, fragmented it, dis-ordered it.

Whatever we might believe about the origin
of these destructive forces within Chris,
whatever our particular view
about the powers of darkness and the demonic,

this we know . . .

This we *all* know, and can *all* affirm.

These destructive forces—mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual—
were *not* of Chris’ own making,
and they were *not* of God.
They were oppressive.
They sought to destroy the whole person of Chris Yoder.
They represent the opposite of God’s good will for Chris,
and God’s good will for this world as a whole.

So does the fact of Chris’ death mean God lost
against these contrary powers?

No. Emphatically, *no!*

The powers that oppressed Chris did not, and *will* not,
have the last word.
The victory still belongs to God who created Chris
in his own image.
Scripture tells us that the same power
that raised Jesus from the grave,
is at work in our lives, and in the world today.

Does that power act to eliminate all suffering, pain, and death?
Of *course* it doesn’t.

It didn’t do that in Jesus’ *own* ministry.
It doesn’t do that in today’s world, as we all know.
But the power of God *does* act in this broken world,
and in our broken lives,
not *only* to be with us in our suffering,
but to redeem our suffering,
to transform it,
and ultimately, to preserve the divine image in us,
that image in which we were created.

It is not happenstance that this man was given the name Christopher,
which means “Christ-bearer,” one who carries Christ.
He was named Christopher by parents who believed, and *still* believe,

that their son carried in his *person* the image of God in Christ.
That image was never destroyed,
nor *could* it have been destroyed.
It was obscured, *yes*.
It was made difficult to see.
At least, it was hard for *some* to see.
But it was always there.
Clearly visible by those who loved him most,
and *named* him “Christ-bearer.”

And now, in his death—though no one wished it to happen this way—
everything that tried to obscure that image of God in Chris’ life
has been rendered powerless.
The living spirit of Christ,
which the “Christ-bearing” Christopher bore in his person,
is no longer trapped by that disease and its related powers.
Chris’ life, is a life that is now redeemed.
Returned for full value.

As the psalm says,
“The Lord redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.”

This we know.

Chris Yoder desperately sought refuge in God.
Yes, his disordered thinking seemed to take him to some
strange and confusing places in that search.
But he did not lose hope.
He kept persisting, kept hoping, kept reaching.
He kept seeking refuge, seeking rest in God.

So this we know.

“The Lord has redeemed the life of this servant.
The Lord has *not* condemned him who sought refuge in God.”

Rather, the Lord has given him rest.

May we all—and especially may Lawrence and Shirlee,
and Greg and Brad and their families—
also find rest in the rifted Rock, which is Jesus Christ.

—Phil Kniss, September 7, 2011