

Do you have times in your life when you feel really connected to God and other times when you feel like God is over here and you are over here? Times when you sense you are very close to God and other times when you feel that God is so far off that you don't have a clue where God can be found? I know about both of those feelings.

I've been thinking a lot about feeling connected and disconnected from God this week as I have watched the unfolding story of Ted Williams. Ted Williams is the man who has been living on the streets of Columbus, OH with the silky smooth voice. When a reporter talked to him and put his conversation on Youtube, Ted Williams and his golden voice became very famous. He has now been interviewed by every major news channel and now has a job with the Cleveland Cavaliers. Maybe more important, he has become reintroduced to his mom whom he had not talked to in 10 years.

Ted Williams is a story of someone who has been given an incredible talent but he wasted his talent, according to him, through substance abuse. This abuse led him to end up living on the streets. There were times when he felt connected to God and the gifts that God had given him. But then the demons of substance abuse led him to become disconnected from God and the purpose of his life.

And when we become disconnected from God, others suffer as well. For Ted Williams, the people who suffered are his ex-wife and their four daughters that she raised, including the one born to a girlfriend. According to his ex-wife, "we survived. My children know that if we get a little bit that God provides, we make it into a lot. I'm a soup maker. I make potato soup and throw in a lot of vegetables and a little bit of meat. We always ate."

I wonder if Peter in our text today was at a place where his own prejudice was keeping him from really connecting to God. Prejudice can do that. When we make decisions about what God can do and limit the places and people where God can move, we may find ourselves disconnected from God. When Peter's prejudice is broken down, Peter reconnects to God through his new relationship with the Gentile Cornelius.

There is an image I share with you that might help all of us in our yearning to grow in our relationship with God. In my spiritual journey I have begun to gravitate toward an image of God that no one has ever presented to me before. Have you ever imagined God being like a hurricane?

Can you picture this with me? Think about those Doppler images of a hurricane as it makes its way across the ocean and heads toward land. In the best formed hurricanes, there is a center eye with bands of wind spinning away. The gentlest winds are the ones farthest away from the center. As one moves closer to the middle, the winds become stronger and stronger. The strongest winds are right next to the eye. And in the middle of the eye, there is a total calm.

One of the ways that God's Holy Spirit is described is being like the wind. You can't see it but you know it is there. If we are distant from God, the winds are there but they just may not be very strong in our lives. We get those gentle reminders that something is there that is bigger than we can imagine but we have a hard time sensing it.

When we are relating to God and we are well away from the center, we know that God is out there somewhere and we see some gentle signs. Maybe we read something that touches us. Maybe we experience something that moves us. Maybe we hear a story like Ted Williams and we think that is nice.

But living out on the fringes is ultimately a place that doesn't satisfy. We need to move closer to the eye of God. We need to move closer to the place where God is at work and really creating meaningful stuff. We need to move to the places where real transformation is happening.

And that is where you and I come into play for one another. We need to help one another move from the outer fringes toward the center where God is moving most actively.

I want to share a story of how I think one person moved from the outer fringes of God's existence to finding a place quite close to the eye.

I did not know until this week the history behind the writing of this song we are about to sing, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." The hymn was written by Tommy Dorsey in the 1930s. Not the big band leader Tommy Dorsey that many folks mistakenly attribute this song to. The Tommy Dorsey that wrote "Precious Lord" lived at the same time as Tommy Dorsey the big band leader.

The composer of this song Tommy Dorsey was a jazz pianist and composer who was born in 1899 in a small town in Georgia. When he was 22 he began to write gospel songs and tried to get them published. It was very discouraging at first. He borrowed \$5 and sent out 500 copies of his first song but it was three years before he got his first order.

In August of 1932, Dorsey was scheduled to be in St. Louis to sing for a revival. He had anxiety about going because his wife was in her 9th month of pregnancy. When he left his home to head for St. Louis, he realized that he had forgotten his music case, so he returned to get it and found his wife sleeping. He stood next to her and felt that something was telling him to stay home. He decided to leave and headed back to his car for the drive to the meetings.

The next night at the revival and after he had finished singing, a telegram was handed to him. The telegram delivered to him the tragic news. His wife, Nellie, had just died. He returned home to learn that his wife had given birth to a baby boy before she died. Before the night was over, however, the baby had died as well.

Dorsey went through a difficult period after that. He said he wanted to give up singing gospel music and go back to just playing Jazz. One of the thoughts that haunted him was whether his reluctance to leave his pregnant wife had been a leading from God and whether he had been disobedient by ignoring it. He vowed that he would never be insensitive to such a leading again.

It was during a subsequent visit about a week later to a friend's house that he sat down at a piano and found himself at peace and a melody stirred up from within him. As his fingers began to manipulate over the keys, words began to fall into place like drops of water falling from the crevice of a rock. That melody became the song "Precious Lord Take My Hand."

Dorsey wrote, "As the Lord gave me these words and melody, the Lord also healed my spirit. I learned that when we are in our deepest grief, when we feel farthest from God, this is when God is closest. And so I go on living for God willingly and joyfully, until that day comes when God will take me and gently lead me home."

As a community of faith, it is our responsibility to lead people toward that center of God. When one of us faces tragedy or stress or difficulty or when we make mistakes, then we help one another move closer to the center of God's being. As a community of faith, it is our responsibility to teach one another the stories of faith so that we are equipped when we face difficult times. As a community of faith we help one another overcome our prejudices so that we can connect with what God is doing with people we may not want to be around and who may be considered outsiders for one reason or another.

As we sing these words which we are about to sing, remember that they were written by a man one week after the tragedy of losing his wife and child.

May his example be an example to all of us about how to move closer toward the eye of God even in the most difficult of situations. AMEN.

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-Ted Williams story from Molloy, Joanna, "**Behind golden-voiced Ted Williams is ex-wife Patricia Kirtley, the story's real hero,**" January 7th 2011, and found at

[http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2011/01/07/2011-01-](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2011/01/07/2011-01-07_behind_goldenvoiced_ted_williams_is_exwife_patricia_kirtley_the_real_hero_of_the.html?obref=obnetwork)

[07\\_behind\\_goldenvoiced\\_ted\\_williams\\_is\\_exwife\\_patricia\\_kirtley\\_the\\_real\\_hero\\_of\\_the.html?obref=obnetwork](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2011/01/07/2011-01-07_behind_goldenvoiced_ted_williams_is_exwife_patricia_kirtley_the_real_hero_of_the.html?obref=obnetwork)

-Dorsey story found at Truth or Fiction web site <http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/t/tommydorsey.htm> and from Morgan, Robert, *Then Sings My Soul*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 2003

-Text: Acts 10:34-43

-Given: January 9, 2010 at Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)