

I think I would be safe in saying that everyone has had heartache, everyone has made bad decisions that caused problems or grief, and everyone has known someone they cared for make a poor decision that made the person miserable—while we had to stand by and watch it happen—pretty miserable ourselves.

Did it hurt? Did you get angry? Did you wash your hands of the whole thing and walk away?

God knows just how we feel. Hear God speaking through the prophet Isaiah:

*Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watch-tower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.
He expected justice, but saw bloodshed,
righteousness, but heard a cry!*

Young parents begin their families with glorious visions of what ‘parenthood’ will be like. They have a tiny baby—so full of life and promise... And then what happens: wonder and happiness, but also pain and anguish.

It’s part of being a parent. A parent needs to let their child learn, and mostly—human beings learn by experience. I’m sure I speak for many when I say that I wish my child could learn from MY experience. If I could teach her about what I have learned—often the hard way—she wouldn’t have to experience the pain herself. No one wants to see their child experience disappointment, heartbreak. No one wants their loved ones have to learn things the hard way.

And unfortunately *experience* doesn’t stop there. There are experiences that – for whatever reason—just happen to us. Some are good—we like those. But there are other experiences that are full of darkness, and it’s hard to bear them sometimes, hard to understand why. Parents see things happen to their children that seem random, that cause great pain. Children

see things happen to their parents. We wish it would stop. We sometimes think we can't bear it anymore, we can't deal with it for one more second. We want to just shut the door, walk away. I bet God does too.

God is wrenched with pain watching his creation—his beloved vineyard—twist itself into knots, to watch his children treat each other as enemies, kill each other, ruin the vineyard with hate, and war, and pride, and lack of care. I wonder if God ever wants to just turn away?

When my nephew Alex was born, just as I was starting seminary, there were complications—he was seriously ill with genetic anomalies—one of those experiences no one asks for, or expects-- and my brother in law, Brad, wrote an article for Parade Magazine about the experience.

He wrote about understanding that there is light and darkness in this world for all of us, at whatever age. He writes about wanting to turn away from the darkneses, or pretend it's not there. He can't understand why this is happening, but then he notices something. I think it will be better in his own words. This is from his article:

“In the weeks following Alex’s surgery we visit him [at the hospital] at least twice a day, and we get to know [his] nurses well. They are regular folks, the kind you would find in the bleachers at a Little League game or in the express line at Safeway...Even so, there is something about them that strikes me as familiar, *yet unusual*. I can’t quite place it...Then one afternoon [nurse] Mary is trying for the third time to find an accessible vein in Alex’s foot for intravenous feeding. The needle site must be changed every 16 hours to prevent swelling, and there is no easy way to find a good vein in a small, pudgy, squirming baby. Now, at three weeks, Alex’s breathing has improved markedly, and he is screaming at a respectable volume as Mary jabs again. “I think that’s got it,” she says. Then I see it. They do not avert their eyes. As a reporter, I have met other people like this: police, garbage collectors, hospice counselors, coroners. They are the ones society officially designates to clean up... They are our removers of darkness...[But] darkness, when faced, is never as bad as we thought. That is why people like Mary and Paula, people who arrange the pillows for [sick] infants...who live and breathe the stuff of our nightmares, project a groundedness, a sanity, a peace about the world, and how it works....Above all, you learn what God’s mercy, the big mercy, really is: more than mere kindness. The Trappist monk...Thomas Merton called God’s mercy “mercy within mercy, within mercy,” meaning that in this world, the small mercies are wrapped up in the bigger ones. I

show my mercy toward my screaming baby son by cuddling him; Mary shows hers by cuddling him at times, and sticking him with that damned needle at other times. My mercy is made only of light; Mary's is made of light and darkness and so is larger and encloses mine. My mercy makes a small healing, hers makes a greater one. Alex could live without my cuddling, but not without that needle. ...To pray only for light is to pray only for tiny mercies."

When God planted his beloved vineyard—his Creation—he gave it everything it needed—and then gave it autonomy. God knew what could happen: the same thing that happens when we love someone enough to let them experience their own mistakes.

And his creation: us: we've learned and produced miraculous things, and we have destroyed. We have learned of the vastness of creation, and of our unlimited potential, while at the same time we often think, and act, narrowly. We hurt others, ourselves, and God.

There is light and there is darkness.

And sometimes we will need the cuddle, and sometimes we will need the needle. Mercy within mercy within mercy. But we have this assurance: God will never avert his eyes. God will always be with us – both in the joy and in the pain. God will be with us unflinchingly because that's what a good parent does. A good parent understands that their child will only learn from their own experience. But the parent will always be there to support their child, and love them, and even assist them when they are asked. Mercy within mercy within mercy. Because we are God's beloved. Amen.