Embracing the Mystery

True faith has nothing to do with jollying people along. It has everything to do with facing the fact that things may be an utter and total mess, may be on the verge of going to hell in a hand-basket, with the conviction that God is at work in the mess.

MICHAEL HIMES

For some mysterious reason, my body has decided to throw a wrench into my otherwise very good life. Even though I’ve been basically healthy for a while now, and my treatments haven’t overly disrupted my everyday life, this disease and its treatment have changed me in many ways—some of which I may never even realize. And even though my doctors and nurses are wonderful, and I’m surrounded by caring friends and family and all their prayers, there is no doubt that this whole thing encircles and encompasses me. It is, to a great extent, what I have become. It is who I am. Or at least that’s how I feel on many days. No one can really say why I have this disease. It is the great and brooding mystery of my life. So I’ve been thinking a lot lately about mystery.
Shortly after my first chemo treatments began, I remember going to church one Sunday feeling like one of those proverbial horses that have been “rode hard and put up wet.” It was not one of my better days. I ached all over. I was listless. I didn’t want to move or think or do anything. I certainly wasn’t in the mood to put much effort into praying and singing. I really just didn’t want to be there. I would have preferred to have stayed in bed.

But since I was already there, I decided to challenge God, who had given me this mysterious disease. (OK, I knew at some deep level that God doesn’t give people diseases, but that was beside the point at that moment.) So I prayed something like, “OK, God, hit me with your best shot. Give me one good reason why I should be here today instead of at home curled up in my nice warm bed with the covers pulled over my head.”

I knew it was a silly thing to do, but that was just the way I felt that day, and somewhere inside me I knew God would understand. I didn’t really think he would respond but, of course, he proceeded to do just that. From the opening song to the Scripture readings to the homily to the communion hymn, I was cut to the quick with the wisdom and the love and the grace of God that day. Every lyric, every prayer, every nugget of Scripture seemed to be spoken and sung for me alone. If not for the power of community around me, I could have been having a conversation with God all by myself. My God, I thought, you are indeed mysterious and, as we all know, you work in mysterious ways.

So I became intrigued by and drawn to the idea that God, all in all, is a mystery. It’s a good mystery, of course. God’s a huge, divine, holy, sacred mystery, and the power of that mystery fills my life. But God’s still a mystery, and I’ve decided to embrace that. My daily prayer has become, “Surprise me today, Lord. Reveal to me some of the mystery and meaning behind all that’s happening to me.”
Since then, I’ve found myself inundated and inebriated with mystery, as well as by a string of confusing emotions like fear, worry, and a few moments of anger. I have had long and good talks with friends and family. And here’s what I’ve figured out so far: This mysterious disease with its equally mysterious treatment will run its course, one way or another. My doctors and nurses are very positive about the prospects of controlling it. So am I. That’s my story and I’m stickin’ to it.

But I know there’s a flip side to that coin, too. None of us, whether we are carrying around a life-threatening disease or not, know the balance of our life. We don’t know if we have a day left or decades. And I believe life is just too precious to spend very much time contemplating the end of it. So in the meantime, I’ve decided to embrace the mystery of the whole thing instead of running scared. I’ve been pretty good at telling others to “keep the faith” over the years when such things happen to them, so now it’s time to follow my own advice.

I’m embracing the wonder of modern medicine and the wisdom of my doctors, along with the frightening notions behind words no one likes to hear or say, like “chemotherapy” and “cancer treatment center.” I’m embracing the power of a healing and life-giving evening of good food, music, conversation, and lots of laughter with my very best friends. Especially laughter. I simply refuse to stop laughing, especially at myself.

More than all this and above all else, I’m embracing the mystery of God’s presence in my life, delighting and in awe of the fact that he knows me and has called me by name. As my friend Fr. Gary once said to me, “Never forget that Jesus is crazy about you, Steve.” That was powerful for me to hear, even though I already thought I knew it. It helped me remember that God is not just “out there,” hovering and lingering over us like a zookeeper. God is crazy about us. As much as I am crazy about my wife and kids, God is way crazier about us all. You’ve got to like that.
My God is a God of mystery, but not because he is removed and distant and uncaring. In the words of author and priest Michael Himes, “God is mystery not because God is so distant but because God is so terribly close.”

My God is the God of all I see and touch and feel. He is the God of all that is coursing through my veins—the good and the bad, the disease and the medicine. God counts not only my days but also the ever-diminishing hairs on my head, my footsteps, and my breaths. He is the God of rare blood diseases and cancer centers and chemotherapy. This is my faith, and my faith is in the mystery of God.

**Name five things**…about God that make him mysterious to you.

**Ask yourself**…do these mysteries bother me, or can I bring myself to embrace them as part of my understanding of God? How can I do that?

**When was the last time**…you felt like Jesus was crazy about you?

_God, you are a great and mysterious force in my life. Teach me to understand and embrace your mysteries as I walk the path that unfolds before me. Help me to sense you beside me, my constant companion on the journey, rather than spending time worrying about what might or might not happen around the next bend. Engage me in the present, secure in your presence. Amen._