



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## Neighbor God

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

July 27, 2014

You, neighbor God, if sometimes in the night  
I rouse you with loud knocking, I do so  
only because I seldom hear you breathe  
and know; you are alone.  
And should you need a drink, no one is there  
to reach it to you, groping in the dark.  
Always, I hearken. Give but a small sign.  
I am quite near.

Between us there is but a narrow wall,  
and by sheer chance; for it would take  
merely a call from your lips or from mine  
to break it down,  
and that without a sound.

The wall is builded of your images.

They stand before you hiding you like names,  
And when the light within me blazes high  
that in my inmost soul I know you by,  
the radiance is squandered on their frames.

And then my senses, which too soon grow lame,  
exiled from you must go their homeless ways.

This poem, from the *Book of Hours*, by Rainer Maria Rilke stands in stark contrast to today's reading from Romans. "Nothing will separate us from the love of God" which is a favorite passage for good reason. It is often read at funerals, in fact we heard it Thursday as we came together to celebrate the life of Dom Longo. There is so much comfort in this passage, particularly for those who have been suffering. They deserve all of the comfort that faith can provide. That comfort is a great part of the appeal of Christianity.



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But the truth is that plenty of things get in our way and do separate us from God or at least from knowing God's love. Lots of images of God are distant and limited by language. Most of the words in our prayers place God, at a distance, in a posture of authority; almighty God, Heavenly Father, Jesus is the only Son of God, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings. All of these titles have a built-in separation. And when we speak of an Almighty God, we are left confused in a world filled with violence and hatred and just plain meanness, along with a whole lot of injustice. An almighty could create fairness if the almighty chose to do so. So we have this gap between what we proclaim and what we experience. The passage from Romans works on a personal level, but God is more than our personal comforter. If we stop our knowing of God at the personal comforter level, then we are what separates us from God.

Rainer Maria Rilke was born in Prague in 1875 and is considered one of the great poets of the German language. His poetry is deeply mystical, in the sense of an immediate experience of God, stripped of grand titles and distant images. Here, God is neighbor, not an all powerful being, but a presence that needs us to be in relationship, to hear God breathe and perhaps bring a glass of water in the night. Rilke said "And should I call you father? That would mean to separate myself from you a thousand times." In his book *The Rilke Alphabet*, author Ulrich Baer "observes that Rilke takes away the hierarchy of the relationship between God and man, without robbing of its tremendous power that resides in it as a relationship of love.

Rilke struggled with life. Making a living as a poet, which was the only thing he was really suited for, was not easy. He did try to work and served as some sort of secretary to the sculptor Rodin. It didn't go well, because Rilke wasn't really the administrative assistant type. But during that time, he learned Rodin's powerful discipline and honed his skills of observation. He also immersed himself in the works of Cezanne and Van Gogh, learning to do with words, what they did with paint. He was drawn to the paintings of Cezanne because they blended the abstract and real and to the work of Van Gogh because of the painters ability to elevate the ordinary to the divine. Both of these traits describe the mystic that Rilke was.

Rabbi Dan Ornstein, from Albany, New York is one of the many people all over the internet that write about Rilke. His observations are spot on.

"Who is this God that Rilke addresses? Certainly not the God that popular religious culture has trained many of us to believe in. That God, meaning that description of God, figures the Holy One as so distant, frightening, mysterious, impenetrably Other, that we could never imagine Him as anything other than *Melekh Ha-Olam*, the imperious Ruler of the universe. Certainly, our experience of life's awesome mysteries can humble us sufficiently to

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Understand, and relate to God in this way. Who is the God that Rilke is speaking to? Imagine yourself awake in the lonely night listening so intently for your parent, your child, your good friend sleeping right next door to you, just beyond the paper-thin walls separating the two of you. You can barely hear him or her breathing, you have no way of knowing how he or she is doing, or even if your loved one is alive! You are so paper-thin-walls close to each other, but even that distance is achingly far. So too, Rilke tells us, is his relationship with God. Rilke's God is potentially vulnerable, even needy, and Rilke wants so badly to knock down those walls separating them because God needs him. Sometimes, God's need for him – for any person – is deeply reflected in even the most mundane tasks of helping other people, symbolized by getting someone a glass of water in the middle of the night. Rilke listens for any sound God would make in the world, the sound of God calling for help. "

Rilke understood that God is so much more than traditional God-talk would have us believe. We live in a world besieged by religious fundamentalism, in which "my way of thinking about God is the only way" kind of attitude reigns. We need Rilke's startling, fresh images and open concept of God to keep us available to the mystical presence. The vision to see God in everything and every way delivers us from small, limited thinking. Stephanie Dowrick, an Australian psychologist and spiritual writer observed, "Rilke's 'God' is a vulnerable neighbor one moment, like a 'clump of a hundred roots' the next; 'an ancient work of art', then a much-needed 'hand', a cathedral, a dreamer. Absent here, breath-close there; as often in darkness as in light."

Such a vast understanding of God can make us vigilant for God's presence and call. It gives us a different context for the claim that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It is not because of God's power to overcome all of the dire things listed in Romans, but because it is God's nature to be found, somehow, in and through all of them. Through Rilke's poetry, God becomes and even more intriguing mystery.

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