



Deeper Waters

The Loneliness of Dorothy Day

“Deeper Waters” column for December, 2007

By Julie McCarty

Many years ago, when I was teaching fifth grade in a Catholic school, a priest came to speak with our class about vocations. During the question period, one boy blurted out, “Do you ever get lonely?”

Without missing a beat, the priest responded, “Sure I do—but everyone gets lonely sometimes.” Turning to me, he said, “Isn’t that true, Mrs. McCarty? Don’t even married people get lonely?”

Frankly, I hadn’t given it much thought, but I found myself agreeing with him aloud. Who was I to contradict a priest, especially in front of the children?

The Long Loneliness

Several years after that, I became intrigued with the title of Dorothy Day’s autobiography, “The Long Loneliness.” How could the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, someone so involved in social activism on behalf of the poor and oppressed be lonely?

In her young adult life, Dorothy experienced five long months of loneliness when she first moved to New York City. “In all that great city of seven millions,” she wrote, “I found no friends; I had no work; I was separated from my fellows.”

Not having been raised in any particular religious denomination, Dorothy led a wild lifestyle in her early adult years, something akin to the wild youth of St. Francis of Assisi or St. Augustine.

As a result, Dorothy conceived a child out of wedlock. Because the child’s father threatened to leave her if she didn’t get an abortion, she aborted her baby, something she would deeply regret for the rest of her life. Her lover abandoned her anyway, leaving her with a double loss.

A couple of relationships later, Dorothy was happy to discover that once again she was carrying the miracle of life within her. At the same time, she was growing more and more interested in the Catholic faith, and wanted to have her baby baptized. Again the man she loved threatened to leave her unless she got an abortion.

This time Dorothy found the inner courage to have her baby, a little girl named Tamar, despite her lover’s threats and the stigma of being an unwed mother. As a result, the man she loved left her—but she gained a daughter and the two were baptized Catholic.

Loneliness was woven like a thread through Dorothy's life even after becoming Catholic. Living in a time when unwed motherhood was considered scandalous, some people criticized her way of life. In those days, few people would have understood the challenges single parents face in juggling the demands of work, parenting, church attendance, prayer, and service to others. Additionally, Dorothy received criticism about her moral positions and even spent time in jail more than once for taking a stand.

Reaching out to others

Despite the unpleasantness of loneliness, it can become a catalyst for reaching out to others who suffer, just as Dorothy Day did again and again. We can build community or "family" in new places. Loneliness is also an opportunity to deepen our reliance upon God's love and mercy.

When we feel lonely, abandoned, or rejected, we can take heart that Jesus, too, knew these experiences. Surely he felt loneliness when his family thought him crazy (Mark 3:21), his friend was in the tomb (John 11:35), people rejected his teachings about Eucharist (John 6:66), or his home town tried to kill him (Luke 4:29). On the night before Jesus died, when he most wanted companionship, his friends fell asleep. On the cross, he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In chapter 14 of John's Gospel, Jesus promises us that loneliness is not a permanent condition: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. . . . In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. . . . I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be." In heaven, sorrow and loneliness will cease, for all will be embraced in the loving arms of God.

Reflection questions:

- Which people in my life might be experiencing loneliness at this time? How might I reach out to them?
- When I feel lonely, what positive things might I do to take care of myself?
- Can you think of other times when Jesus may have felt lonely?



Did you know...?

The late Cardinal O'Connor, Archbishop of New York, was instrumental in beginning the process which may lead to the eventual canonization of Dorothy Day. When Rome approved opening the cause, Dorothy Day received the official title "Servant of God" and a guild has been created to educate people about her life. To learn more, visit www.dorothydayguild.org.

To learn more about Dorothy Day:

- "The Long Loneliness" by Dorothy Day
- "Dorothy Day: Portraits by Those Who Knew Her" by Rosalie G. Riegle

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- “Love Is the Measure: A Biography of Dorothy Day” by Jim Forest
- Movie: “Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story”

About the columnist:

Julie McCarty is a syndicated columnist and author of *The Pearl of Great Price: Gospel Wisdom for Christian Marriage* (Liturgical Press). Contact her through her website, www.juliemccarty.com.