The Closeness and Kindness of God: A Theological Reflection

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Denver, Colorado, has a spectacular view of God. And God, a spectacular view of Denver.

And when we are in the arms of those majestic mountains, inhabitants and strangers both, God, a spectacular view of us.

I look to the psalmist who looks to the mountains and asks, “From whence shall come my help?” And while inhaling the air at so high an altitude, the answer comes as naturally as the next breath: “My help is from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

The truth is our God lies hidden behind the highest range of sheer mystery in creation far and wide. And at the same time, the truth is that our God, in the light of faith, is seen over and over in the rising and setting of a constant love peeking through scriptures old and sacred, with a tender and touching look into lives ever new and precious.

A God towering so high above us that the wind and storm blow and frighten our sensibility as we look up to a language that can somehow hold on to our shaking faith. And at the same time, a God standing so near right in front of us that flesh and bone draw close and cling in a feeling that can somehow relax in a secure faith.

So to call God kind, at first, seems a long fall from the majesty of grace. Kind seems so simple. Too simple. The Nobel committee does not give an award for kindness. The ritual for entering “the ranks of educated men and women” does not include an honor of magna cum “kind.” Men and women will not be compensated six-figure salaries and bonuses for kindness.

But stop and think about it. If someone was standing in the funeral home summing up your life before your most human remains, what would it mean to have him or her say that you were a kind person? Is there anything more worthy than kindness?

My reflection on kindness came down the mountain and into the city of Denver in a much too simple act late on a Saturday evening breaking into a Sunday morning. The night was cold and crisp and clear, and so I decided to stroll the long 16th Avenue outside mall enjoying the solitude and quiet of an abandoned earlier bustle of
shoppers and tourists. No sound but the echo of my own footsteps. The town was all mine.

Then I noticed the figure of a tall man partially hidden behind the pole of the public telephone that he was apparently using. He was young, nicely dressed with a long coat and a full head of dark curly hair. I noticed him in passing and continued glancing up at the old buildings, and even higher up at the brightly lit stars in the sky. Just as I was approaching him on the sidewalk, he hung up the phone and started walking. His footsteps were now joining the echo of mine.

Then he stopped. Having just passed him, I instinctively turned around to see him stopped and standing seemingly dazed. I knew something was wrong. I hesitated, then walked back toward him and asked, “Is something wrong?”

He looked up at me with eyes near tears and said, “Yes.”

“Is there something I can do?”

“No,” he said, and then forcing a smile continued, “but thank you.”

I think I said something about hoping things would be okay and then continued on.

I was about a block and half away and I had looked back several times and he was still standing there. With a rush of adrenaline, or perhaps it was grace, I turned around thinking, “I can’t just leave him there.” He was obviously hurting, and I thought, badly.

As I turned around, so did he, and as I closed the distance between us, a thought, no, a conviction, crossed my mind: this is the right thing. He watched me as I walked toward him. “Would it help to talk?” I asked. He smiled again, shrugging his shoulders. “Would you like to go for a cup of coffee?” I continued. “That’s the problem,” he said, “nothing is open.” I hesitated, obviously assessing my safety needs. “I have a coffee machine in my room at the Hyatt if you want to go there.” He hesitated, probably doing the same assessment. “Okay, I will go, but I might change my mind.” “That’s fine,” I said.

We walked in the cold night and he began his story. He and his wife had a fight and she stormed out of the nightclub many hours earlier and he had been calling home repeatedly, but there was no answer. He was frightened, sad, and bewildered since she had never done this before. He talked about some problems in their one-year marriage.
By now we reached the hotel. He decided to have a cup of coffee, use my phone to call home again, and figure out what he should do. We talked for some time. Finishing his second cup of coffee and getting ready to leave, he looked up at me and said, “When I turned around and saw you coming back, I couldn’t believe how kind a person you were. Thank you so much.” I smiled. “Oh,” he went on, “look what time it is and I have kept you up this long.”

Earlier he talked about his faith—he was a Buddhist, though he didn’t need to tell me that he was raised a Catholic with a name like Ryan. As he left I told him I would pray for him and for his wife. He looked up and in an endearing, somewhat awkward return he said, “And I will keep you in my meditation.”

I smiled as I dozed off with a dawning insight that perhaps the only reason I was to be in Denver this cold first weekend in February was to be kind to Ryan. Oh, I had lots of important meetings, accomplished some important tasks in my work for the association, but none of these will probably be recorded in the book of the living, save the cup of water, or in this case the cup of coffee, I gave to the least of the little ones.

I am not a particularly kind person. I would like to be. But in truth, when whoever remains in conversation standing before my most human remains speaks of me it will not be that he was a kind person. I say this with no false humility, but that attribute is reserved I think for God and for a few saintly ones.

My majestic experience of kindness in Denver is a good one. Hopefully, we all come down occasionally from our own mountains of self-importance and do a random act of kindness, because when we do, I believe, we are doing a random act of God.

Praying the next day on my drive to the airport while watching the snow-capped mountains recede further and further in the background, this notion of kindness nagged my consciousness with something that someone wrote or told me about the kindness of God. I thought, “I think it was a bishop.” Now I talk to a lot of bishops in my work but not usually about kindness, God’s or ours. I wish we talked about kindness. I think we talk kindly. The brain computer search drive was on.

And then hours later it struck me! In my monthly mailing from the Archdiocese of Boston, the recently ordained auxiliary bishop, Walter Edyvean, had written something about the kindness of God in taking his turn in writing a “monthly spiritual reflection.” I called and had his secretary FAX a copy to me.
In reflecting upon this past Advent and Christmas season, he offer the insight that “the Catholic vision is marked by this conviction, in faith, that God is close and kind.” Bishop Edyvean quoted from the office of readings wherein a Gentile convert is trying to persuade his friend to move toward Christianity. He quotes the “Letter to Diognetus” (Office of Readings for December 18) wherein he says that “God, the Lord and maker of all things . . . has always been, is, and will be: kind, good, free from anger, truthful.”

In Walter’s own words, “God’s closeness and kindness are what human beings desire. Should we think that the modern world, however unspecified its quest, is looking for less? Or that we ourselves desire less?”

Closeness and kindness from God. Yes, that’s my quest. That’s my desire.

Closeness and kindness of God. How does this come about? I think God’s closeness and kindness come in close and kind acts incarnated day and evening, yes even late into the evening and early into the day. Whose close and kind act—mine, or Ryan’s? Who felt the warm breath of God on his ear in the whisper of prayer riding away from the spectacular view of our God in Denver?

Who among you feels the warm breath of God in a close and kind act with a patient, a parishioner, a client, a family member, one of the staff, a neighbor, or a stranger?

I hope Ryan and his wife are okay. I hope they will be okay. I hope that kindness will beget kindness just as grace begets grace. I hope that I may do more random acts of kindness since in doing so I get a spectacular view of God.

I smile when I think of the “monthly spiritual reflection” meeting my “living human document” this past weekend in the conversation called prayer. Such an encounter reminds me of a crusty old man coming in for a Mass card over 20 years ago sharing a bit of wisdom that stuck in the mind of this zealous newly ordained priest. “Father,” he said. “I am here at Mass every Sunday. No offense, but I don’t get much out of the priests’ sermons [he must keep missing my Mass]. But if I hear one word, or get one thought that touches my soul one out of those 52 Sundays then its worth sitting through the other 51!”

So, in a second act of kindness in one week, I appreciate this one monthly reflection that touched my soul out of the I don’t know how many monthly reflections that I sit through. [For any Vision readers from Boston who have written a “monthly spiritual reflection,” I must
have missed yours.]

This one reflection framed my picture of a spectacular view of God one night below the majestic mountains surrounding Denver.