

The Heartbreak and Anger of God

Ascension Sunday; in the aftermath of the Uvalde School Shooting

A sermon by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on May 29, 2022

I read a novel this year about an astronomer and his nine-year old son.¹ One of their favorite things to do together was to look at the night sky and wonder together what unknown miracles might exist amidst our galaxy's four hundred billion stars. Or what other worlds might one day be discovered in the ever-expanding universe of 2 trillion galaxies and counting beyond our Milky Way. On one night during one of these star-gazing sessions, the son turns to the father and asks a question. He asks, *Which do you think is bigger—outer space? Or—placing his finger to his father's forehead—inner space?* Even with all their hours of outer space exploration in mind, they agree immediately that inner space is bigger. I find that to be a beautiful thought.

I also find it to be helpful in this moment. Because it gives me language to understand why the death of children feels so uniquely devastating. It helps me understand why I feel like I have been hit by a truck of heartbreak while at the same time I'm almost boiling over with anger. The death of a child is more than just the loss of an individual life. That's too simple. It is the loss of an entire universe. It's the loss of something more complex, more wondrous, and more mysterious than all the stars in the sky. Consider the many various and tangled histories—of generations, of entire people groups, of blended ethnicities, of chromosomal disposition and DNA—that all contribute to the distinct curvature of a single nose or the quirky confidence of a single personality. And consider how that utterly unrepeatably shape of a person is further changed by the ever-changing circumstances of an everyday life—by the food they eat, the friends they make, the books they read, the accidents they bear. Look into the eyes of any child and see a universe, a universe of infinite and ever-expanding possibility.

But not a universe that exists on its own. A child's life is created and sustained by others. Most often parents, but not always, and never exclusively. Children are raised by a village of parents and teachers and cousins and grandparents and doctors and nannies and godparents and friends, each of which have their own role to play but who are united across their various expertises and capacities by one thing: love; their common desire to love a child towards adulthood. This group of allies collectively pour tens of thousands of hours of love into sustaining the life of one small person. This is near the core of our heartbreak. That a child whose life has been sustained by dozens of people pouring tens of thousands of hours of love into their life can be cut short by a single person in a single moment making a single decision of hate.

And this, for me, is where heartbreak transforms into anger. My heart aches for all the love lost, and my blood boils towards all the hate that made it possible. There are plenty of targets to choose from. Toward eighteen year old Salvador Ramos, the killer of these children. To his "village" of caregivers who failed to love him such that he could ever become such a monster in the first place. To whatever circumstances that led to those caregivers' inability to love Salvador as he deserved. To internet communities that prey on the loneliness of teenagers to radicalize them for their own ends. To the purposely unregulated gun industry that sold him his instruments of

¹ *Bewilderment*, Richard Powers

destruction. To technology that allows any one person to end any one life by pressing a button. To police who did not do their job. To politicians who care more about preserving their own power than they do helping those they take vows to serve. To a country that seems hell bent on its own destruction, whose incapacity applies not only to gun control but to caring for the planet or giving anyone actually suitable health insurance or really anything at all other than going to war.

I guess all I'm trying to say is that if you're feeling heartbreak and anger, there's good reason for that, and I'm right there with you. And actually, what I really want to say, is that I think God is too. I think God is heartbroken. And I think God is angry.

Today is Ascension Sunday. The day when God disappeared. The day when the disciples found they had a new problem to solve. Where is God now? How do we know what God thinks or feels now that Jesus is no longer with us? You wonder how the disciples felt when terrible things started to happen, like when the city of Jerusalem was flattened by the Romans. Or when the Emperor started rounding up Christians and feeding them to the lions.

It actually didn't turn out to be that complicated. To answer these questions, all the disciples had to do was remember what Jesus was like. To remember what he taught. And that's what we still do today. If you're wondering where God is or how God feels in moments like the one we're living in, remember this: remember how much Jesus loved little children. How he waved aside crowds of adults so he could spend time with those to whom the kingdom of God truly belonged. Remember how Jesus wept, how his heart broke at the grave of his beloved friend Lazarus to whom he did not get to say goodbye. Remember Jesus' anger toward the Pharisees, toward those who spoke the name of God with their lips but whose action revealed that they cared only about political power. Remember Jesus' anger in the temple towards those who chose a love of money over a love of God. How God feels on a day like today is actually not a mystery at all. God is heartbroken. And God is angry.

Actually, I suspect God feels this way a lot. God created and sustains our entire universe God creates and sustains each of us. God creates and sustains with love. More than tens of thousands of hours. From the very first hour that ever was, in fact. We are his beloved children. Made in his own image. We are each entire created universes of complexity, wonder, and mystery in and of ourselves. God delights in the infinite and ever-expanding possibilities of our lives. There is so much love baked into our creation. Into every flower and every blade of grass. We have everything we could possibly need. But we all too often give hate in return for God's love. We choose ourselves over others. We choose violence over peace. We choose death over life. We squander our inheritance over and over again. It's been said that no one can break your heart like your own children. Imagine how God feels.

But what makes God different from us is that there's nothing we can do that will turn his love into hate. There's no number of times we can screw up, no number of times we can betray his trust, there's nothing we can do that puts us beyond the reach of God's loving grace. Because love isn't an emotion for God. It's not something that comes and goes. Love is God's whole way of being. His heartbreak and his anger are just two different forms his love takes—and it takes many other forms besides. God can't be untrue to who God is—and God has chosen from the beginning of time that he would never not love us.

That's the only word of hope I have for you in this difficult week in this difficult life. It's not one that cures our heartbreak. It is not an effective antidote to our anger. It's a word of hope that may feel small, but it's small like a seed that grows. God never stops loving. Despite everything, despite anything we do or have done or will do, God never stops loving us. And the love of God that never stops truly never stops. It continues beyond the grave. It is a love that is stronger than death. We are rightfully filled with heartbreak and anger at the loss of 19 little universes of infinite complexity, wonder, and mystery, but those universes are not lost to God. Their lives are changed, not ended. And God holds them still, in all their unrepeatable beauty, and they will continue to grow into God's infinitely wonderful possibilities. And we can only wait. And that seed slowly grows. That small seed will grow until it crowds everything else out. And eventually heartbreak and anger will fade away and all that will be left is love. And we will hold the loves we lost again. And God will hold all of us forever.

Amen.