

“The Pain of Living”

Numbers 21:4-9
Mark 15:21-32

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In my last sermon I mentioned that due to the high anxiety level in our society today we tend to have a low threshold for pain. We are averse to anything that may cause us pain. We view anything painful as harmful. But in truth there are many things that are painful that are not harmful. For example, surgery is painful, but in most cases it is not harmful. It's intent is to heal not to harm. But due to our general aversion to pain, we so often seek to avoid anything that is painful.

The problem is that part of life is painful and not just for some, but for everyone that lives. I had a man in my office the other day who was extremely anxious. His mother had died a few years ago and the pain was almost unbearable to him. He had lived with her and taken care of her as best he could, but she died and he could do nothing about it. And now his father is dying and he knows he cannot stop it, but he doesn't want to go through the pain again.

What could I tell him? Just ignore it? Just drink yourself into oblivion to numb it all? He was getting eaten up by the pain that he knew he would have to face because he loves his father. He knows that he will see his father and mother again. He has that hope, but the pain seems too much to bear.

In some ways this is like the season of Lent. It's painful to focus on the suffering of Jesus. And maybe it's somewhat because it is Jesus, but I think it's anyone's suffering. It could be a story about anyone's suffering and we don't like to dwell on it. It just seems too much to bear. The truth is we would avoid it altogether if we could. We would live a pain free life if we could. Certainly we try our very best to do it.

Why do you think the drug industry both legal and illegal are doing so well? It provides a way to avoid pain. We are also uncomfortable with the pain and suffering of others. We seek to insulate ourselves from it. We try to live in neighborhoods that will minimize our exposure to human pain. Perhaps that's why suburbs exist. There is a reason why nursing homes aren't filled with visitors. Too much pain to witness. From a political perspective perhaps we have not focused as much on the horrible situation in Darfur and other places where people are being brutally oppressed and systematically destroyed because it is too painful and messy.

I supposed God could have taken the same path. He is often accused of it. God could have just insulated himself from the messy, painful world of the flesh. He could just stay up in heaven being sung to by the angels and worshipped by those who have escaped that messy world by dying. But that's not what God did.

He put himself right in the thick of it. He was born of a woman. God was a little baby as vulnerable as any life. He grew up to be a full-grown man. He was tempted like

we are tempted and he experienced pain like we do. He entered right into this painful reality we call living.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus said, “That which was not assumed is not healed; but that which is united to God is saved”. That which was not assumed is not healed. Or if God didn’t enter into our world fully, then he could not save it. God couldn’t just come as a voice in a cloud or like a ghost. He had to become human to save humanity. And God didn’t come immune to pain.

The priests and the scribes, the soldiers, even the bandits hanging beside him mock him. They say, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” Perhaps this was simply sarcastic. But maybe they kind of hoped that he might come down and be the kind of Messiah that they wanted. One who didn’t suffer, who didn’t die, who was not like them. One who would lead them in a pain free way. A way without a cross, a way without suffering, a way without death. But if he did that, then who does he save? Himself, I supposed, but no one else.

That which was not assumed is not healed. Who in history has not suffered, has not died? Who among us has not suffered, and will not die? What Jesus did was take on, assume the fullness of our pain, our life. Even when they offered him some wine mixed with myrrh, which would have been a pain reliever, he wouldn’t take it. Jesus didn’t want to avoid or even lessen any pain, because that which is not assumed is not healed. That which he did not share with humanity he could not save. He experienced the very depth of our pain, our rejection, our humiliation, our damnation, voluntarily, freely, without deserving any of it. So that he could bring God and creation together again. Atonement- at-one-ment. Reconciliation, forgiveness, oneness.

The second part of St. Gregory’s saying is, “But that which is united to God is saved.” That which was not assumed is not healed. But that which is united to God is saved. So in Jesus God has assumed our pain, even our guilt. And we are saved by being united to God. He is the connector, the bridge. He is like a power cord adaptor. He connects both the human side and the God side. But not without pain.

We come together with God in pain and in suffering. But we seek to avoid pain and suffering. We are glad that Jesus was willing to do this, but that was his purpose. Ours is to enjoy the fruits of his work. He suffers, we are saved. He dies, we live. It’s a pretty good deal. But that’s not exactly it. We are not promised that we escape suffering or death. In fact we are promised a cross to bear.

Columbian born Queens, NY bus driver Jorge Munoz decided four years ago he could no longer separate himself from the hunger problem in his neighborhood. He began serving hot food, coffee and hot chocolate from a mobile kitchen outside a subway stop...7 days a week...365 a year. He has not missed a day in 4 years. He spends 400-450 dollars of his 700-dollar weekly paycheck and his whole evening to do it. When asked why he said, “Because I have food and others do not, I must share.”

We are called to follow Jesus into a suffering world. We are not called to insulate ourselves from it, but to enter into fully. That which is not assumed is not healed. We are called to assume the responsibility of bearing with others in their suffering. In doing so we become united to God. This is our salvation.

In the short time I have been here, I have witnessed a wonderful willingness to reach out to those who suffer. It starts right here in our church. When members suffer the community comes to them. No one suffers alone here. At least that is our hope. Surely we have failed, we are human after all. But I have seen us go beyond the walls of membership even. We have chosen to enter into a suffering community hundred of miles away in Harlan, Kentucky. We don't suffer with them all year, but for a time each year we enter into their world and every year we share some of our blessings and take on some of their pain. Once a week now we open our doors to our neighborhood and share space, food, and fellowship with anyone who will come that we can share our blessing and their pain, turning theirs and ours to a bigger Ours. This is the life of Christ, creating a bigger Ours, and bigger We. This is the purpose of God coming to this world and sharing our humanity, so that He could share His blessing and our pain, creating a bigger Our and bigger We.

So, what can I say to someone who dreads the pain of living? What can I say to that man who was in my office last week? Let's go through it together. Let us be a part of your life and you become part of our life. And this is being a part of God's life. Christ brings us together, not to avoid the pain of living but to shoulder it together. When many become one by the power of Christ, no one suffers alone and all experience the blessing of God found in His grace.