

The Problem of Pain

Romans 8:37-39

I spend a lot of time thinking about pain and suffering. If you get my blog, and I hope you do, you see I've been spending the entire week talking about the "why" of suffering. Over the last few weeks, as we've watched the things going on in Haiti we've tried to process it all. We've come together in this place during the last few weeks, as a Christian community, partly because we know of no better place to bring our questions and our grief and partly because we don't know where else to turn. The Apostle Peter once said to Jesus, in a moment of confusion and doubt, "**Lord, to whom else can we go?**"

I wish I could say that the pain of suffering people would disappear, vanish and never return. I wish I could say to suffering people that "Things will get better." "You'll get past this." "This too will pass." Those who offer such comfort mean well, and it's true that in the immediacy of suffering, what you feel now will not be what you always feel. Yet it is true that what happened in Haiti ... or what happened on 9/11 in New York City ... or what happened on the campus of Va. Tech University will stay with those persons forever.

I remember when my mother died. Yes, it was true, that the grief did melt away, but like snow it also came back, in fierce and unexpected ways. Sometimes it was triggered by a sound, or a smell or some fragment of my memory.

So I cannot say what I want to say to suffering people that this too shall pass. Instead I have to point to the pain one feels, and will continue to feel, as a sign of life and love.

When I was 18 years of age, I was working on a construction crew building an interstate highway. I was injured one day and taken to the hospital. I remember the doctor probing and asking, "Does this hurt? Do you feel that?" Well, the correct answer ... the answer he desperately wanted was, "Yes. It hurts. I can feel it." Each sensation gave proof of life, of connection ... a sign that my body remained whole. And the scar that was left on my forehead is a sign of my healing.

I'm told that when you have a deep wound that there are two types of tissue that must heal: **the connective tissue** beneath the surface and **the outer, protective layer** of the skin. If the protective tissue heals too quickly, the connective tissue will not heal properly and may lead to complications later on. The reason why I like to speak to suffering and pain when tragedy occurs on our planet is in order to help this deep, connective tissue to heal. Later the protective layer of tissue will grow back in the form of a scar.

We gather in this place each weekend as followers of Jesus Christ, and as such we aspire to follow a man who came from God 2,000 years ago. If you were to read through the first four books of the New Testament, you would find only one scene in which someone addresses Jesus directly as God. The text reads, "**My Lord and my God!**" Do you know who said that? It was doubting Thomas, the disciple stuck in grief. He was the last holdout against believing the incredible news of the Resurrection.

There is a tender scene where Jesus appears to Thomas in his newly transformed body and obliterates Thomas's doubts. What prompted Thomas' outburst of belief ... "**My Lord and my God!**" was his identification of Jesus' scars. Jesus said to him, "**Feel my hands. Touch my side.**" In a flash of revelation, Thomas saw the wonder of the Lord of the universe, stooping to take on our pain.

God doesn't exempt even himself from pain. God joined us and shared our human condition, including its great grief. Thomas recognized in that pattern the most foundational truth of the universe: that God is love. To love means to hurt, to grieve. Pain is a mark of life.

The Jews that were schooled in the Old Testament had a saying: "**Where the Messiah is, there is no misery.**" After Jesus, you could change that saying to: "**Where misery is, there is the Messiah.**"

So where is God when it hurts? We know where God is because he came to earth and showed us his face. You need only follow Jesus around and note how he responded to the tragedies of his day: with compassion ... and with comfort and healing.

You may have asked over the last number of days, why the poorest country in the western hemisphere would be struck through the movement of tectonic plates? Why these people? I cannot tell you, and I encourage you to resist anyone who offers a confident answer. God himself did not answer that question for Job, nor did Jesus answer why questions. We have hints, but no one knows the full answer. What we do know, with full confidence, is how God feels. We know how God looks on Haiti right now because God gave us a face, a face that was streaked with tears. **Where misery is, there is the Messiah.**

Not everyone will find that answer sufficient. When we hurt, sometimes we want revenge. We want a more decisive answer. Frederick Buechner said, **“I am not the Almighty God, but if I were, maybe I would in mercy either heal the unutterable pain of the world or in mercy kick the world to pieces in its pain.”** God did neither. He sent Jesus. God joined our world in all its unutterable pain in order to set in motion a slower, less dramatic solution, one that involves us.

One day a man confronted Phillip Yancey, the author of the book, *Where is God When it Hurts*.¹ The man asked Yancey a question saying, “Well I don’t have much time to read. Can you just answer that question for me in a sentence or two?” Yancey thought for a second and said, “I guess I have to answer that with another question: **‘Where is the church when it hurts?’**”

Do you remember a few years ago when the world was focused for a few days on the Amish Country near the site of the Nickel Mines school shootings. There were reporters from every major country swarming the hills of Pennsylvania, looking for an angle. They came to report on evil and instead ended up reporting on the church. The Amish were not asking, “Where is God when it hurts?” They knew where God was. With their long history of persecution, the Amish weren’t for a minute surprised by an outbreak of evil. They rallied together, embraced the killer’s family, ministered to each other, and healed wounds by relying on a sense of community strengthened over the centuries.

This reality came starkly home to me a few years ago when my life went spiraling. I had enjoyed some great years of ministry, but now it was no longer fun. I was exhausted and depressed and enormously discouraged when it came to meaningful ministry. I had lost my way. In a moment of real clarity God gave me four questions to focus on: **Whom do I love? Whom will I miss? What have I done with my life? And am I ready for what’s next?**

On Friday night, I was watching a movie with Chase and MacKenzie and we heard a character in the movie say the following: **“I’ve figured out that what you do with your life is only half the equation. The other half ... the more import half ... is who you’re with when you’re doing it.”**²

I would like to promise you a long pain-free life, but I cannot. God has not promised us that. Rather, the Christian view of the world says several things: It says that the world is good. It says that the world has fallen. Finally, it says the world will be redeemed. Creation, the Fall, Redemption ... that’s the Christian story in a nutshell.

We know that the world is **good**. All you have to do is look around at the blaze of spring when it comes to the hills of western North Carolina. Look around at the friends you love.

We know, too, the world has **fallen**. All we have to do is look at the pain of Haiti.

I ask you this morning to trust that the world will be **redeemed**. This is not the world God wants or is satisfied with. God has promised a time when darkness will be defeated, when events like mass shootings and natural disasters will come to an end. God has promised that even the scars we accumulate on this fallen planet will one day be redeemed, as Jesus demonstrated to Thomas.

I heard someone say one time that he had no problem believing in a good God. He said, “My question is, ‘What is a God good for?’” Dallas Willard once said, “**For those who love God, nothing irredeemable can happen to you.**” Now what about that? Is God good for that promise?

I would like to promise today an end to all pain and grief and loss and tragedy. I would like to guarantee that there will never be anymore hurt. I cannot. I can, however, stand behind the promise that the Apostle Paul made in Romans 8 that all things can be redeemed and can work together for good. In another place in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul spells out some of the things he encountered, which included beatings, imprisonment, and shipwreck. As he looked back, he could see that somehow God had redeemed even those crisis events in his life.

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.” Paul concluded, *“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:37-39). God’s love is foundational truth of the universe.

God can redeem what now seems unredeemable. Remember the darkest day of human history? It was the day in which human beings violently rose up against God’s son and murdered the only true innocent human being who has ever lived. We remember that day not as Dark Friday or Tragic Friday or Disaster Friday ... but rather as Good Friday. That awful day led to salvation of the world and to Easter. It was an echo in advance of God’s bright promise to make all things new.

So let’s review what we’ve said this morning. **First of all, honor grief and pain when it comes your way.** The pain represents life and love. The pain will fade over time, but it will never fully disappear.

Secondly, as you look for healing ... never attempt it alone. The real healing ... of deep connective tissue, takes place in community. Where is God when it hurts? Well, it is where God’s people are. Where misery is, there is the Messiah, and on this earth, the Messiah takes form in the shape of his church. That’s what the body of Christ means.

Finally, cling to the hope that nothing that happens, not even horrible tragedy, is irredeemable. We serve a God who has vowed to make all things new.

Do you remember the writer J.R.R. Tolkien. He once spoke of “... **joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.**” Those who have suffered loss and grief and heartache ... you know well the poignancy of grief. And as your heart heals, you too may know that taste, a foretaste of the world redeemed.

¹ For over 30 years, Phillip Yancey has helped me to wrestle with the problem in pain. I am grateful his many books that have helped shaped some of my theological orientation.

² From the movie *Past Grad*.