

Witness to Pain

March 25, 2016
Good Friday
12:00 pm
John 18:1-19:42

It's hard to face pain in the daylight. At least for me. Darkness seems to be the appropriate place for grief, pain, and sadness. As we darkened the church last night to the verses of Psalm 51 "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness..." I took comfort in the quiet presence of friends and it felt good to be hidden from sight.

Somehow facing the same thing in daylight makes it worse. It seemed to add insult to injury that it was such a beautiful day when the planes hit the twin towers on that crispy cloudless September day. It was a normal start to the day for commuting and traveling in Brussels this week. The wrong time for explosions and death.

And there are those among us for whom no joy comes in the morning, who bear deep grief or mental anguish through the night only to wake with it still heavy in their hearts. A friend who lost her father once told me, "I thought the grief would lessen after time, but it never felt any lighter; I just learned how to carry it better." For those in pain, there is no choice to skip ahead to Easter, to resurrection.

This day shines harsh light on all the suffering in this poor broken world. And while it is hard to look at the suffering, to see it exposed, to sit with it, it is what we are called to do on this day. For if we are ever to get to Easter, to celebration, we have to have something to celebrate.

It is good to spend time in the valley of the shadow of death. For even if the sunshine of good fortune is shining on you and all those you love, you will one day find yourself walking through that valley or you may watch your beloveds on that journey and feel powerless to stop them. I meet with couples preparing for marriage and they often seem to be trying to prove to me

how perfectly happy they are and how perfectly suited for one another they are. Which is great. I wish each one of them happiness and mutual joy. But, I promise them that there will be pain and brokenness and that they would have to learn to be with each other in sorrow and shadow. Even the truest, deepest love is not a defense against heartache, in fact it is a recipe for more of it.

And so whether you are here reluctantly, looking forward to the alleluias of Easter or whether you are trapped in a never ending Good Friday from which you would like to escape, here we are, facing pain, in the harsh light of day.

All of us who experience pain, whether it is the physical pain of the body or the equally agonizing pain of the mind and spirit, can be grateful for the therapies that doctors and pharmacists have brought to us. When my mother was in the grip of her depression, exhausted with sadness and anxiety, I was so thankful for the advances in psychology and psychiatry that probably saved her life.

But there was a spiritual component to her pain that had no pharmacological answer – the eternal why of suffering. The battle for existence in the face of circumstances that seem to make existence foolish and burdensome. That is not to say that we should spiritualize suffering and elevate suffering as a spiritually richer state, but that the fact of suffering in our lives is, of course, a spiritual issue.

How frustrating then that faith can aggravate that pain. Faith has sometimes caused shame in suffering – for suffering is necessarily self-obsessed and not outward looking and service oriented as we are often exhorted to be. We are often told, be grateful that you are not a refugee, a homeless person, a whatever a less fortunate person is... This bit of advice has probably never been actually effective and has the dubious theological result of rejoicing in the

greater suffering of others in order to feel blessed oneself. Religion would do well to dispense with this kind of therapy for pain.

The spiritual gifts of pain and suffering can be that it may be a time of reckoning, a retreat from the world so that only what is most essential remains. Though any relief this brings to the one in pain is felt long after the pain is gone.

The pain must be felt. And so we pay attention to the pain on this day. The paradox is that as we look to the cross, the source of pain, and do not turn away or explain away the suffering, our hearts are moved. Compassion awakes in us. Love eases pain and makes us so very vulnerable to it. Peter Abelard, whose theory of redemption was markedly different from Anselm's substitutionary atonement, the theology that Jesus' death paid for our sins. Abelard believed the cross commands our attention with its public spectacle of pain and suffering breaks our hearts open to love and removes our fear. It is this fearless love that saves us and makes us fully human.

It was Jesus' love for the world that led to his trial and execution. He said that love was stronger than religious and political law and he paid the price for that love. But through that price love was perfected and continued.

We shine light on the cross today because it is paradoxically the source of pain and the source of love. We are invited, if we have the courage, to lean into the pain, lean into the nails of the cross and feel more deeply our own brokenness, deficiencies, and failures not to punish ourselves but to have compassion on ourselves and others.

It is hard to face the pain in the harsh light of day, but if we manage to walk through struggle or grief as opposed to going around it, if we face God's seeming resistance to our most pressing petitions, we can expand our capacity for pity, for compassion, for love. Perhaps that

capacity is without limits, perhaps it can be the source of a strength we would have never known. I dare not promise it on this day, but I hope so. Sometimes it does cause me to tremble, but when crosses come into our lives we can strive to be standing in the light, present to the pain.