

Reflections on Suffering

A sermon by James R Blades
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, California
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Stephen Ministry Emphasis Sunday
Text: 2Corinthians 1:3-11

In his excellent book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the old tale of a woman who has suffered the cruel loss of her only son. She goes to the wise old sage of the village and inquires: Is there any talisman to take away the relentless ache of my heart?"

"Yes, there is," says the sage. "Find the household that has suffered no sorrow and there you will find the enchanted mustard seed. Bring it to me and I will use it to heal your pain."

So she goes, first to the most palatial house in the village. Surely, she says to herself, the rich suffer no pain. She lifts her trembling hand to knock at the door. "I have come to find the enchanted mustard seed in the house that has felt no affliction," she announces to the richly dressed woman who opens.

"You have come to the wrong house," the woman replies—who then proceeds to tell all troubles her household has lately suffered. As the inquirer listens, she feels a surge of compassion welling up for this woman of the house, for she too has known suffering.

Then, continuing her quest, she goes to the door of the town's venerable priest. Surely, she thinks to herself, God awards little suffering to the house of piety. But, here too, she hears stories of pain and disappointment. Here too, she finds deep emotions of sympathy that make her identify with the man's sorrow.

On she goes, from house to house, in her quest for the magic mustard seed. But she cannot find a single house that is free from the pain of affliction. Instead, she finds herself over and over again speaking words of comfort to those she encounters, for she understands their pain. She also finds something else: the empty places in her own heart strangely filled.

Then suddenly she realizes that she has found the real object of her quest: Not an enchanted seed, but the balm of empathy that brings healing to the injury in others, yes, and also in herself.

The old story rings true to experience. Why do we suffer affliction? Sometimes it is because of our own shortcomings, true. Sometimes it is because of the sins of others of which we are innocent victims. But a good deal of the time, it is simply because we are human beings; because pain, sorrow and disappointment are part of our human portion, all of us in this world, whether we are rich or poor, pious or irreligious, wise or foolish.

Gary Larson, in one of his *Far Side* cartoons, powerfully captures an image that many of us have in our minds when we think of God. Maybe you've seen it. Here's this dufus haplessly walking under a piano suspended by a rope. And here is God viewing the scene on his computer screen, with his finger poised to hit the "smite" button.

Is it true? Are the tragedies of this world God's doing or God's will? Does *God* smite the unfortunate with tragedy and trouble, suffering and sorrow? Look at the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and there you will find the answer. Look in the gospels and there

you see the God-man not afflicting but healing. Not *using* misfortune and pain and sickness and sorrow as a divine instrument, but *opposing* it at every turn!

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray "Thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven." We pray that way because God's will is NOT done on earth. Jesus comes to inaugurate the rule of a loving God in terror-torn world. And how does he do it? Not with the hand of wrath and retribution but with the hand of healing. "God did not send God's Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved, healed."¹

Jesus brought God's healing, redeeming power to the world; established a beachhead, if you will. But the work is not yet finished. Not until Jesus comes again to reign. "In that day," says the last chapter of the Bible, "there will be a new heaven and a new earth And God will wipe away every tear; and there will no longer be *any* death; no longer *any* mourning, or crying, or pain." What a day of rejoicing that will be!

Meanwhile, as we await that day, the tares grow along with the wheat. The evils of this world continue to menace, even while God's Spirit works to save and heal. And what do we do while we wait? Do we sit on our hands, scanning the sky for Jesus' appearing? Do we stand helpless by until the magic moment when we are raptured out? No, we are called to be instruments of Christ's healing, saving work. "As the Father has sent me," he said, "so I send you."

I shudder when I hear someone say to some sorrowing soul, "It was God's time to take your husband," or to an afflicted soul "God sent you this affliction to teach you some lesson of piety."

When my daughter was born seven weeks early and her life hung in the balance, one of the teachers of my church said to me, "If God takes her, it will be to spare her from the perdition." Do you suppose I was encouraged?

Such assertions are blasphemous! God does not send our afflictions. Jesus is evidence of that. But neither does God spare us from them. And why not?

The answer to this question is complex and I would not dare try to fit an answer to these few minutes, even if I had a satisfactory answer, which I don't. But look carefully at this morning's Scripture lesson and I think you'll find it sheds at least a glimmer of light upon it.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Do you see what the apostle is stating here? That God, first of all, is the heart of mercies and the God of all compassions, a point we've already made. And that this God does what? *Spare*s us from all our afflictions? No, who *comforts* us in all our afflictions, in order that what? That we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God!

That word *comfort* is an interesting one. It has a lot richer meaning than the one it is narrowly taken on in recent generations. It is the combination of two Latin words: *con-* which means *with* and *forte* which means *strength*. When most of us hear the word "comfort" we think of that which merely makes us feel better, like *comfort food*. But the

¹ John 3:17

broader meaning of the word is to *fortify*, to impart strength and support and courage by being present alongside. Take this meaning of the word and here's what you get in this morning's text:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . who imparts strength and support and courage by being present alongside us in all our afflictions.”

A much richer picture, don't you think? And, as a matter of fact, this is very close to the meaning of the original Greek word of the text. The word is *parakaleo*, which means to be called alongside—the very title which Jesus applies to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity who indwells us, which is often translated *Comforter*.

This is what God does in our afflictions as long as we open ourselves in surrender to God's ministrations. God strengthens us with divine presence and power and encouragement. But there's more, isn't there?

God so walks alongside us, in order that we may in turn walk alongside others in their pain.

John Henry Jowett sums it up this way: “God does not comfort us to make us comfortable but to make us comforters.”

Haven't you noticed? That the best person to walk alongside a person in distress is one who has felt that same distress themselves? Haven't you noticed that the “Samaritan who rescues you most likely has been robbed and has bled in his day, and it is a wounded arm that bandages yours when bleeding?”²

In 1989, United Airlines Flight 232 while trying to land, cart wheeled and crashed short of the runway in Sioux City, Iowa. One-hundred and twelve people perished in that crash but 184 others survived. Jerry Schemmel, a twenty-nine year old man was one of the fortunate, later became involved in a support group to help him cope with the lingering emotional trauma. The press service that interviewed Schemmel quoted him as saying this about his recovery experience: “For me, talking to other survivors is the most valuable thing, as far as therapy . . . You can talk to counselors, your wife, your family, but when you sit down in front of another person who went through the same thing you did, you know that person relates exactly to what you're talking about.”

It's true. What better person to hear and support and encourage a person who has been through something than another who has been through it themselves? What better person to encourage you when you're down than the one who has walked through that same lonesome valley?

So what's the point we're driving at?

Just this: What if your affliction is a clue to your calling? What if the pain in your life is your opportunity to change a piece of the world for others who suffer the same? What if that ache in your heart, that failure of your marriage, that childhood memory of abuse, that experience of being treated unjustly, that experience of joblessness, that wound in your psyche or weakness in your character, what if it is your opportunity to be a blessing to others?

Here's where healing begins: It begins with yielding ourselves to God; making ourselves, our sorrows and disappointments available to God that God may turn them to instruments healing and redemption in this broken and terror-torn world.

² William Thackeray

And isn't it just here where our lives begin to touch the mystery of the Cross? There on an ugly hill called Golgotha, God transformed an instrument of shame, pain, injustice and death into an object of redemption for the whole world. And God can do the same with our wounds; can transform them into fountains of healing for the part of the world that our lives touch.

The first Sunday evening of March, we will again begin the ten week Stephen Ministry Training Series. Here is practical training that will give you the tools to bring the strengthening, comforting, redeeming presence of God, which you have experienced in your hour of pain, into the experience of others who suffer. Would you like to turn your pain to gain, both your own and someone else's? Learn how to allow the Comforter to use your wounds as fountains of healing to others? Thirty-five hours of training is no small commitment, but it could be a life-changing one—both for you and someone your life is destined to touch. If you're interested to know more about Stephen Ministry training, Barbara Pascoe will be in the courtyard under the Stephen Ministry banner to give you information.

Let us pray: God of compassion and God of all comfort, we yield ourselves to you now that you may make us comforters. We thank you for your redeeming power. Take our lives, take our talents, yes, and even our sorrows and make them instruments of healing to others. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen