

Homily – Healing Through Pain

Rob Keim

July 1, 2018 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

This past week I was sent the graphic that you see here. If you could pick only two pills which two would you pick. The nine alternatives to choose amongst are:

Pet lives as long as you.

Eat anything and not gain weight.

Gain one million followers.

Read the mind of one person daily.

Get \$500 per day for the rest of your life.

Find your soulmate.

Never pay for food again.

Never feel pain.

Boost your confidence by fifty percent.

Now, many of us have read enough fairy tales and fables, that we can see a downside in many of these choices. What if you die and your pet is still young? What if I already have a soulmate? What if the million followers would never leave me alone?

Quite the intriguing list, and each person I talked to seems to select the \$500 per day as one of their two choices. But, the second choice really seems to vary by person based on what is going on in the person's life.

This past week, I picked "never feel pain." This is not because I am going through any pain, but instead I am walking with several of you who are.

Now, pain can be physical, mental or spiritual. There are many types of pain. One definition I read, said pain is anything which is outside our control and causes suffering.

I look at body, mind and spirit as three components of a person – three parts of self. These three parts are connected and inter-related and when

one component is suffering, then it can impact the other two. Conversely, as one component of self is healing then it can also help lift up the other parts.

And, I saw this first hand when I was a chaplain at the Palo Alto VA Medical Center. The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD suffered by so many that are returning from the wars in the Middle East, this PTSD is a reminder that healing is not just about body.

Mark, the writer of this morning's Gospel reading, shows Jesus healing a woman from life long illness, and then shows Jesus raising a twelve-year old girl from the dead.

"He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age)."

Bible scholars point out that Mark, the writer of this Gospel, is showing that Jesus has miraculous powers. Three weeks ago in this Gospel, Jesus was casting out demons. Last week Jesus had power over the wind and storm. And this week, Jesus is shown with power over disease and even death.

In this morning's reading we see Jesus alleviate the pain and suffering of the woman with the hemorrhages, the pain and suffering of the daughter, and the pain and suffering of Jairus along with his family and friends. As the perfect union of God and human, Jesus has power to bring miracles and alleviate suffering.

By extension, prayer is the way that we tap into these miracles that come from God.

I believe that prayer is one of the most important things that we do in life. I look at prayer as a conversation with God and as a way to strengthen our relationship with God.

There are many ways to pray, and prayer is meant to be an honest conversation with God about things that are on our hearts. Prayer is not meant to be pious and saccharine. You know what I mean about that overly sweet prayer that we sometimes hear.

Prayer is meant to be honest. If we are angry with someone, then pray to God about it. If we desire something, then pray to God about it. If you feel hopeless, then pray to God about it. If you are filled with joy and gratitude, then pray to God about it.

So, if you want healing from illness, disease or accidents then pray to God about it.

Healing prayer is incredibly powerful and incredibly intimate. It is a very vulnerable state in which a person is opening themselves up to their inner needs and hopes. For me, doing healing prayer with a person is an honor and a privilege.

God works through us to provide healing. We must have the desire for healing, the belief that it is possible and take the action through prayer to ask for healing. We must be open to the working of the Holy Spirit and be willing to take the risk that the response might be different than we desire. We must be willing to share the pain of the suffering and continue praying when healing is not evident.

And, as we pray it is important to remember God's eternal and unchanging love. God is always embracing us, even when we don't see it. We don't need to be good enough to earn God's love. Two thousand years ago Jesus took care of healing our relationship with God. God is never going to reject us. An answer of "no" from God is not a rejection.

Now, two years ago, when I preached about healing, I went into more depth on healing prayer and we said aloud some healing prayers from our Book of Common Prayer that you find in the pew rack in front of you.

Two years ago, I acknowledged that recovery is not always the outcome of our prayers. I wish it were, but it is not. Prayers are certainly called for in these circumstances as well. But two years ago, I said that lack of recovery is the topic for another day. And, that day is today.

Maybe you are like me, but there are some days when it seems like pain and suffering are all around. It would be easy to ignore it and pretend like it isn't there, but grief and sorrow are there anyway.

I heard a sermon on Good Friday that said that our pain and suffering is our ticket into heaven. I have to say that I didn't like that sermon. Maybe it was too neat and tidy or maybe it just seemed masochistic, but that sermon did not provide meaningful answers to me.

And, we often tell a person in pain to have courage and faith, but sometimes that seems like we are just supposed to hide our pain and suffering so that those around don't have to see it or participate in it.

“Stories of suffering are hardly the whole of life, and most of the people I know are in a pretty good place. Yet every life has a story, and every story is marked by pain, loss and sorrow. Sometimes we suffer; other times we have to watch people we love suffer. Each situation is difficult in its own way.”

New York Times contributor Peter Wehner wrote a column in March called “After Great Pain, Where Is God?” In it he wrote, “while it's fine for Christians to say God will comfort people in their pain, if a child dies, if the cancer doesn't go into remission, if the marriage breaks apart, how much good is that comfort exactly?”

In 1940, the great British apologist and theologian, C. S. Lewis wrote “The Problem of Pain.” Among other things, he wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” I find that Lewis's answer to why an all-good and all-powerful God would allow his creatures to suffer pain was once again a bit too neat and tidy.

Now flash forward two decades to the publication of “A Grief Observed,” which Lewis wrote after the death of his wife. God’s megaphone didn’t just rouse Lewis, it nearly shattered him. In writing about his bereavement, Lewis described what it was like to go to God “when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.” He added: “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about God. The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”

Doubt had crept into the writings of C.S. Lewis, but I don’t believe that this doubt is due to a lack of faith. Instead, I am reassured by the questions and uncertainty of this great man because he mirrors some of my own doubts. And Lewis was hardly alone in expressing doubts. Jesus himself, crucified and near death, gave voice to the question many people overwhelmed by pain ask: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus’ question, like ours, was not answered in the moment. Even he was forced to confront doubt. But his agonized uncertainty was not evidence of faithlessness; it was a sign of his humanity. So what, then, does our spiritual tradition, Christianity, have to offer in the midst of hardships and heartache?

The answer, I think, is consolation, including the consolation that comes from being part of a community of God — people who walk alongside us as we journey through grief, offering not pieties but tenderness and grace, encouragement and empathy, and when necessary, practical help. One can obviously find supportive friends outside of a Christian community. My point is simply that a healthy community of God should be characterized by extravagant love, compassion and self-giving.

For many other Christians, there is immense consolation in believing in what the Apostle Peter describes as an eternal inheritance. “In this you

rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,” It is a core Christian doctrine that what is seen is temporary and what is unseen is eternal, and that what is eternal is more important than what is temporal.

But even so great an assurance as eternal life, at the wrong time and in the wrong hands, can come across as uncaring. It’s not that people of God, when they are suffering, deny everlasting life; it’s that in being reminded of this hope they don’t want their grief minimized or the grieving process overlooked. All things may eventually be made new again, but in this life even wounds that heal leave scars.

There is also, for me at least, consolation in the conviction that we are part of an unfolding drama with a purpose. At any particular moment in time I may not have a clue as to what that precise purpose is, but I believe, as a matter of faith, that the story has an author, that difficult chapters need not be defining chapters and that even the broken areas of our lives can be redeemed.

The book of Isaiah, in prophesying the messiah, describes him as “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” We’re told “by his wounds we are healed.” For those of the Christian faith, God is a God of wounds, where the road to redemption passes directly through suffering. There is some solace in knowing that while at times life is not easy for us, it was also hard for Jesus. And from suffering, compassion can emerge, meaning to suffer with another — that outlook, in turn, often leads to acts of mercy.

I have seen enough of life to know that grief will leave its scar. But I have also seen enough of life to know that love leaves a mark too.

However, even after all these words, my prayer is that my magic pill be to never feel pain. And, I pray this for you as well.

Parts of this sermon are based or taken from a column written by New York Times contributor Peter Wehner called "After Great Pain, Where Is God?"