

Homily - Healing the Body

Rob Keim

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One of the most anticipated books of last year was "American Dirt" by Jeanine Cummins. This widely read book is about a Mexican woman and her son as they flee the violence of the drug cartels that had killed the rest of the family. The two escape to America and work to leave the trauma behind. The book is praised by some who think it humanizes the plight of so many immigrants who are not only trying to make a better life for themselves, but they are trying to stay alive. The book is vilified by others who dislike that the author is white but somehow thinks she can write accurately about the Latin-x experience. Be that as it may, the book certainly opens the heart of the reader to some horrors faced by migrants, horrors that most of us will never experience. And, I start today with this book, because it is such an obvious contemporary parallel to today's Gospel reading.

The story of the flight of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus is not one that we hear very often on Sunday morning. Usually, our church calendar has only one Sunday after Christmas before we start the season of Epiphany. But, this year we have two Sundays in the short season of Christmas. So, we have an opportunity to wrestle with a Scripture reading that we don't normally hear in our three year cycle. And, today's assigned Gospel story is a little out of order, because it is not until next Sunday that we hear the reading of the three wisemen who follow the star. Joseph and the family don't flee to Egypt until after the visit of the Magi. I don't know why the readings fall in this order, but we are going to go with the flow.

And, like the mother and son in "American Dirt" the holy trio migrates to escape violence, restart their lives in a new place, and leave the trauma behind. But leaving trauma behind is easier said than done, for after the instigating events or series of events, we tend to take trauma with us in our bodies. We take it to new locations. We take it to bed with us. We take it to the store and to the beach. Trauma stays with us until we do the work to let it go.

Trauma is caused by the wounds that are imprinted into our bodies. It is the crushing sensation in the chest that might get labeled as anxiety or depression. Trauma is the fear of losing control and always being alert for danger or rejection. Trauma includes self-loathing and flashbacks that fog the mind and keep you from opening your heart to another. God has created us so that our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains. This knowledge is typically experienced as a felt sense of constriction or expansion, pain or ease, numbness or energy. And by felt, I don't mean feelings and emotions. I mean the muscles, organs, and nerves of your body feel somethings physical. Traumatic knowledge is stored in our bodies as

wordless stories about what is safe and what is dangerous.” And, trauma is not just created by violence. It can be created by physical threats to the body, or mental dangers that are only sensed.

Let me share a well-known Bible story that results in trauma. A few years ago, I read a book called “Son of Laughter” about the Old Testament figure Isaac. There are a lot of stories in the Book of Genesis about Isaac, and one of the most well-known is how he was almost sacrificed by his father Abraham. At the last minute, God provided a ram to be sacrificed on the altar instead of the boy Isaac. The book “Son of Laughter” was very descriptive about the aftermath of this aborted sacrifice of Isaac. Isaac was traumatized by actions of his father, and never recovered. He carried the trauma with him in his body for the rest of his life, and like much unresolved trauma the negative effects were passed down to the next generations as well. The Book of Genesis is full of the family disfunction that is passed down to Jacob and then even to Joseph and his many brothers. Yes, this family of Hebrew patriarchs is the beloved of God, but trauma meant they were carry around a lot of heavy baggage with them. Curiously, Sarah, the mother of Isaac and the wife of Abraham was also traumatized by the aborted sacrifice. She was not present during the actual event, but she heard about it, and feared for the safety of her son. Like Sarah, we too can be traumatized by events that happen to our loved ones.

So, I wonder how Joseph and Mary and Jesus dealt with the trauma. Herod wanted to kill the baby Jesus. In fact he killed all the other babies in Bethlehem. You may have noticed that we skipped over a few verses in the Gospel reading. We skip verses 16-18, perhaps because they are too violent. Here are those skipped verses. *“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.””* Maybe Jesus and his parents were a mile down the road when they heard about the violence. Maybe they had already migrated all the way to Egypt. Bethlehem was not a large town and scholars speculate that Herod only killed 12-20 babies, but this type of violent event creates trauma that gets inside and stays with you until you do the work to let it go. Since he was a baby when they fled and probably 2-3 years old when they returned, perhaps Jesus was too young to internalized the trauma. Perhaps, Joseph and Mary never told him about it. Most, if not all, of us don’t remember being two or three years old, but child psychologist believe that even babies and toddlers internalize stuff. I wonder what the Holy Family did to release their trauma. We only hear of Joseph one more time so we don’t know what he did, but traditionally we say that both Mary and Jesus are pretty health people. So what can you and I learn from Mary and Jesus to let go of our own

trauma. Whether it is trauma from physical violence or threats to our personhood, many of us walk around with trauma. We take it with us everywhere that we go. In my own life I have a few things that get triggered, and I have a sense of shame over how the pain in my body seems to be something that I can't control. I hate not being able to just let something go. Do you ever feel this way, and by feel I don't mean emotions? I mean that dread that is felt by the muscles, and organs, and nerves of your body. I feel helpless when my body remembers a trauma. Trauma marks us with a deep sense of anxiety. We continually sense danger, which makes us mistrustful. With trauma we easily succumb to self-doubt. And, it isn't the event that has already happened, but the one that could happen at any time that keeps us in a state of high alert.

Now, for many the wounding of their souls is not generally recognized until midlife. And, unresolved grief, internalized shame and guilt, loneliness, personal family traumas, intergenerational issues, and societal pressures keep many from moving beyond disorder and into reorder. Furthermore, the wounds of individuals lead to larger wounds in society, which further wound individuals in a negative feedback loop. We become a society of people who are seeing danger all around us, which leads us to look for authority figures and structures that offer us the security and certainty we crave.

However, there is also healing from trauma. The final chapter for Mary and Jesus was not written by the trauma of the violence from King Herod. And, like Jesus, God created us as embodied beings. For some reason, these bodies can collect trauma, but God has also created us to release that trauma. Our bodies can forgive past hurts and move together with other healed bodies so that we can heal the world. The genius of Jesus' ministry is that he embraces tragedy, suffering, pain, betrayal, and death itself to bring us to God. There are no dead ends. Everything can be transmuted, and everything can be used. Everything. God has created us to heal and then be healing agents in the world.

And, with healing or release of trauma our minds and bodies become quiet, We experience an inner spaciousness that is the Ground of Being. We realize that God is real and is not simply an idea. In fact, God is the thing that is most real in existence, the very foundation of existence itself. People have associated this inner peace with the presence of God, which is manifesting itself at every moment, and is available at every moment. With healing we move to a place in which we feel solid, steady, and supported. This groundedness is the way God created us to be and through it we can take heart and have courage. We can embrace the real meaning of faith in which faith is not belief, but a real, immediate knowing that comes from experience. And faith with experience brings reliable guidance.

Now, today I want to conclude with a spiritual practice called “Welcoming Prayer” that was created by the spiritual teacher, Mary Mrozowski. The Welcoming Prayer is a simple way of releasing trauma by surrendering to God’s presence in our daily life. This method can help us dismantle unhelpful habits held in our bodies so that we respond rather than react to circumstances. To be clear, I’m not suggesting that we welcome or accept abuse, trauma, or oppression, but rather that we welcome our feelings around those incidents. Here is the practice.

Sit with your hands in your lap and your feet flat on the floor. Begin by becoming aware of how your body feels. Notice any tension or pain. And, here is the prayer that goes with this spiritual practice.

Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me in this moment
because I know it is for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions,
persons, situations and conditions.

I let go of my desire for security.

I let go of my desire for affection.

I let go of my desire for control.

I let go of my desire to change any
situation, condition,
person, or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God and
the healing action and grace within.

Now, holding this intention lightly, identify a hurt or an offense, something or someone who has hurt you or let you down. Feel the pain of the offense the way you first felt it, or are feeling it in this moment, and notice the hurt in your body. Note that I said notice the hurt in your body and not in your mind. Because if you move it to your mind, you will go back to dualistic thinking and judgments: good guy/bad guy, win/lose, either/or. Feel the pain in your body so you don’t create the win/lose scenario. Identify yourself with the suffering side of life; how much it hurts to hurt; how abandoned you felt to be abandoned. Once you can move to that place and know how much it hurts to hurt, you could not possibly want that experience for anybody else.

This might take a few minutes. Welcome the experience, and it can move you to the Great Compassion. Don’t fight it. Don’t split and blame. Welcome the grief and anger in all of its heaviness. Now it will become a great teacher. If you can do this you will see that it is welcoming the pain and letting go of all of your oppositional energy that actually frees you from it. Who would have thought? It is our resistance to things as they are that causes most of our unhappiness—at least I know it is for me.

Most of us are never going to have to flee for our lives, but some of you have had violence in your life or in the life of a loved one. And, most of us have had trauma develop. May 2021 be a year in which we release trauma and live into the beautiful God has created within us.