

The Management of Pain

For many weeks after Christmas I drove by a house in Batavia that bore what seemed to be two countervailing signs. Over the main part of the house ^{was} ~~was~~ emblazoned ~~thxxx~~ the greeting: "MERRY CHRISTMAS." But over the garage was another quite prominent sign which read: "Beware of Dog." I drove by that house several times just to contemplate that juxtaposition. Indeed, we have celebrated our world's surest sign of hope - the Coming of Christ. But we also live in a world ~~xxxxx~~ which makes us afraid. As a Christmas gift this year our son had special locks placed on all our doors. Little children are being, of necessity, taught to be wary of strangers, and not to accept any favors. Women are invited to take lessons in warding off sexual assault. We are being taught how to cope with muggings. So on the one hand it is "Merry Christmas," but on the other it is "Beware of Dogs."

Most of us are by ~~nat~~ nature sunny and optimistic, but watching the nightly news - especially in Chicago - is like ~~going to work~~ viewing an unending montage of horror films. And if one plunges too deeply into experiencing this evening holocaust one becomes afflicted with deep, almost uncontrollable pain. How does one manage to live with this pain?

Most of us, too, are people of faith, however thin and superficial. Yet I daresay that many of us feel somewhat like Stephen Kumalo when he sang in Maxwell Anderson's classic adaptation of Alan Paton's great novel of South Africa, "Cry the Beloved Country:"

Before Lord God made the sea and the land,
He held all the stars in the palm of his hand,
And they ran through his fingers like grains of sand,
And one little star fell alone.

Then the Lord God hunted through the wide night air
For the little dark star on the wind down there - -
And he stated and promised he's take special care,
So it wouldn't get lost again.

Now a man don't mind if the stars grow dim
And the clouds blow over and darkens him,
So long as the Lord God's watching over them,
Keeping track how it all goes on.

But I've been walking through the night and the day
 Till my eyes get^w weary and my head turns grey,
 And sometimes it seems maybe God's gone away,
 Forgetting the promise we heard him say --
 And we're lost out here in the stars --
 Little stars, big stars,
 Blowing through the night,
 And we're lost out here in the stars.

Yes, on the nightly news when the clouds blow over and darken out^r skies,
 as terrifying shadows ^{Flash} dance across our screens, it does seem that maybe
 the Lord God Almighty has gone away, Forgetting the promises we heard him
 say. And our souls are afflicted with pain.

How does one bear these pains? I think the assignment of my daughter,
 Debby, to a new nursing position offers some suggestions. Debby is a
 Clinical Nurse Specialist in the famous Anderson Cancer Hospital in Houston.
 She has just taken a new position in which she joins with ^{other} ~~our~~ fields of
 specialty to manage pain. The assertion is that though pain cannot be
 eliminated, it can be managed. I find in what she is doing a meaningful
 and helpful parallel with our Christian faith. Consider two ways we have
 of managing pain as Christians.

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One way we have of managing pain is through our fellowship as
 Christians. Indeed, this is a sacred function of the church.

The church is not meant to be a group of chummy people who just get
 together to congratulate each other on mutual virtues, so as to keep others
 out. But it is a community in which we help each other, "Bear one another's
 burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal.6:2,RSV) As a pastor of
 over 40 years I have seen this happen again and again.

We are indeed, as someone has pointed out, at our best like a football
 huddle in which we draw close to one another, put our arms around each
 other, and learn the signals for going back to the line of scrimmage. It
 is not a huddle to hide from the world, but a gathering of people, many
 of whom are hurting, to make it possible for us to face the world without
 fear, and with resolution.

This is the reason for our being here this morning, worshiping together. Perhaps many of us watched the news last night, and we felt pain. But this morning we embrace each other as we listen to the Gospel, and we are encouraged in hope. Just by accepting each other as members in Christ, we learn to manage our pain. Rick Steele, a bright young ministerial friend of mine, recently shared a rabbinic tale. A disciple asked his master, "How do I know when the night has ended, and the first dawn has broken? Is it the moment I can distinguish a sheep from a dog?" The holy man answered, "No." The disciple persisted: "Then is it the moment when I can tell the difference between a peach and a pomegranate?" "No," concluded the holy man. "It is none of these. Until you can gaze on the face of any man or woman and say, 'You are my brother, you are my sister,' you ~~remain~~ remain in darkness. But at that moment, dawn breaks." ("News N Notes," Trinity-Pilgrim UMC, Brookfield, WI. 53005, Feb. 5, 1985) The light of Christ overcomes our darkness when we accept all human souls as our brothers and sisters, and they, and we, are then able to manage our pains.

Jeremiah in a state of tortured depression and gloom asked: "Is there no balm in Gilead?" He was thinking of the territory of Gilead which produced sturdy trees, famous for its medicinal balm. Howard Thurman in a marvelous little book, Deep River, reflecting on certain of Negro spirituals, writes that "The slave caught the mood of (Jeremiah's) this spiritual dilemma, and with it did an amazing thing. He straightened the question mark in Jeremiah's sentence into an exclamation point: 'There is a balm in Gilead!' Here is a note of creative triumph." (p. 56) And that is what we of the Church of Christ do, too: we hear the gospel, and then together we straighten out the agonizing question mark and declare: "There is a balm in Gilead!" As the people of God that is how we manage our pain.

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Let us know, then, that as we leave this fellowship of praise and worship today, we go back to our lives in the world, empowered to manage

and overcome whatever pain we feel. This is the love of Christ that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (I Cor. 13:7,RSV)

In this way the Christian can take a fearless look at the world. The Christian need not shrink back in paralysis from the nightly news. O, the Christian knows pain all right; but there is in faith management for that pain.

I asked my daughter Debby what some of the techniques were for managing pain in a cancer hospital. She sent me a booklet which, among many other suggestions, speaks of the power of imagery. "Imagery is using your imagination to create mental pictures of situations. The way imagery relieves pain is not completely understood . . . (but) if you must stay in bed or can't go out of the house, you may find that imagery helps reduce the closed-in feeling; in your mind you can imagine and revisit favorite spots. Imagery can help you relax, relieve boredom, decrease anxiety, and help you sleep." (Questions and Answers About Pain Control, American Cancer Society, p.28) How suggestive that is for any pain we must bear! Close your eyes in prayer. Think of those momentous occasions in your life when you have truly believed in Christ. Perhaps it was when you were young and daring. Think back upon your baptism, and remember that Christ was there, offering you power and grace for your life. Despite the painful nightly news, think of Christ. Remember what Paul wrote to the Philippians: **2. .I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me.**" (4:11-13,RSV) We cannot abolish our pain, but by thinking on these things, we can manage it.

Whenever I feel my own soul wracked by pain there is an imagery that lights up my mind. It is a true and real picture I saw many years ago.

Shortly after I was appointed as minister of the Indianola Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio, I went to the hospital to call upon a young man who had been ^{frightfully} ~~horribly~~ injured in an auto accident. It seemed that he would never be able to walk again. I called on him many times. He was the only child of his father and mother. After he was released from the hospital his mother never left his side. She became his constant companion in his rehabilitation. Miraculously he began to walk again, quite haltingly, supported by heavy braces, and his mother's arm. It was a marvel to see the way they together were determined to overcome^u his injuries. Then one ~~night~~ dark and rainy night I was ^{called} ~~summoned~~ from a meeting at the church. I rushed to a nearby street corner where he and his mother had just alighted from a bus. But on that dark, rainy night a car had shot out of the thick night, striking his mother fatally, and leaving John standing there all alone, helpless in the rain. It fell to me that night to take John home and then call his father who was a principal of a night school. Later I went with the father to identify the body of that wife and mother. We took an elevator down into the bottom of the hospital, and then made our way through a long, winding and dimly lighted tunnel, emerging in the morgue. And there together we viewed her broken body. I wondered how John would ever survive without his mother. There was a service at the church, and the next day was Sunday. I was in my study, wondering what I could possibly say that morning to a grieving family and congregation. I looked out the window of my study. I was electrified by what I saw! The sun was rising brightly overhead, drenching the earth in benevolent warmth and beauty. Down the street, coming toward the church, as the church bells were sounding, were John and his father. Closely entwined in his father's arm, they moved slowly toward the church, their feet shuffling awkwardly. But there they came to worship Almighty God, and that day as a congregation of Christ we embraced each other in this renewing witness of faith. Out of that darkness John emerged in the light, and he is today an able and highly regarded hospital administrator. That imagery enables me to manage the

pains I feel, and it is an imagery with ^{a voice over} the soundtrack of these words:

"For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:39, RSV)