

Genesis 50:15-21  
Luke 13:1-5

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## THE PRACTICAL SIDE OF PAIN

He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you." *Luke 13: 2-3a*

There were popular notions abroad in Jesus' day that physical ailments were God's punishment for sins committed. But Jesus does not go there. Indeed, in no miracle recounted in Mark's Gospel does Jesus ever claim that sin is the reason for the affliction. The same is true of the other Gospels. In fact, on two occasions, in John 9:2, and Luke 13:1-5, our text for today, Jesus says specifically that sin is not the cause of the affliction. About some people killed by Governor Pilate's soldiers, and others killed by a collapsing tower, Jesus asks, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?—No!"

Yet for centuries nothing has clung more tenaciously to the popular mind than the belief that affliction, pain, and suffering are penalties inflicted on us by God for sins we committed, and we often imagine we know just what God is chastising us for. But Jesus refuses to link suffering to punishment by God. Our very word "pain" doesn't exactly help. It comes from the Latin *poena*, meaning penalty or punishment (as in penal code, penitence and penitentiary) and so popularly insists on such a connection. That we have all fallen short of the glory of God, that is "sinned," cannot be disputed. To deny that, to maintain that we each set our own standards, amounts to nothing short of anarchy in a nation under the rule of law. How can we say that in our relation to God, when we know that daily we break the civil law each time we make a rolling "California stop" at the stop sign, or exceed the speed limit by even a fraction. Certainly, there are consequences inherent in all actions, some sinful, whereby pain, suffering, and disease may come upon us as the outcome of our moral choices, but God does not pass sentence by inflicting pain upon us—not according to Jesus. Jesus refuses to link pain or affliction to punishment by God.

Even the Book of Job—the single most influential work in the Bible that struggles with the reasons for suffering—reveals that the afflictions that are *allowed* to come upon Job are not supernatural in origin, not heaven sent, but all are the consequences of natural phenomena—the stuff of life, albeit with terrible swiftness and hardship.

What then is pain? The late Charles Schultz, creator of the “Peanuts” comic strip, brings to mind Charlie Brown’s definition: “Pain,” he says, “is when it hurts.” Unfortunately there isn’t much more that medical science in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can add to that. I remember listening to a specialist on chronic pain treatment on National Public Radio, who said that even the medical community cannot offer a satisfactory definition. “Pain,” it suggests, almost apologetically, “is whatever a patient describes it to be.” When the distinguished British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, was asked by his dentist, “Where does it hurt?”, he is said to have replied, “In my mind, of course!” Suppression rather than cure of pain seems to be the only sword we can wield against it, so we medicate the problem, and are glad of it.

It’s as though the best we can say as to the presence of pain is that it just goes with the territory. A story about St. Patrick from the fifth-century helps illustrate the point. St. Patrick was baptizing a Celtic king by the name of Aengus. The saint, leaning on his sharp pointed staff, inadvertently stabbed the good king’s foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick noticed blood oozing from the king’s foot, realized what he had done, and apologized profusely, begging the king’s forgiveness. “Why did you suffer the pain in silence?” Patrick asked. The king replied, “I thought it was part of the ritual.”

If it is not helpful to probe too deeply as to the function of pain—beyond its being a welcome warning that something is amiss, we can at least speak to its effects. As C. S. Lewis has written in *The Problem of Pain*, while pain is not good in itself, it generates good in that the one in pain often draws closer to God and thus helps cope with the pain, be it physical, or that ragged emotional pain that comes with the stuff of life. The work of the church is substantially that of alleviating suffering: psychological, spiritual, and emotional pain, as well as encouraging those who must pass through physical pain. But ironically, it is the presence of pain in lives that brings about redemption, the healing and wholeness of lives in renewed condition and restored relationship. Should we doubt this, we need only look to the efficacy of Jesus’ ministry and its culmination on the cross. The cross, with the bent and anguished figure of Jesus gasping unto death, is a hideous symbol of pain and the rejection of God by the world. Yet paradoxically, the empty cross—the Easter cross, is also the sign of its supreme opposite, unbounded love, invitation, and the promise of redemption—that is, our being brought back by Christ to God. But the day of pain cannot be separated from the day of redemption.

That there is no Easter without Good Friday, no rebirth of the self without something of the self dying, no maturing without affliction, we know intuitively. Few have demonstrated how pain (not just physical pain) matures us in our faith in God, as did James Fowler a few years ago in his groundbreaking book, *Stages of Faith*. Through research gathered in hundreds of in-depth interviews with people

from all walks of life, Fowler showed how faith matures in response to crisis, how it leads us from one level of faith to another. When faced with a crisis in which personal faith in God is called upon to make sense of the event, Fowler (my doctoral advisor), showed how people arm themselves with those pieces of their faith tradition that support and help them negotiate the crisis, simultaneously setting aside those former pieces that now seem irrelevant or meaningless. It's somewhat like demolishing a circular wall of bricks that once gave us shelter from the world, retaining only those bricks that make sense in a new construction, and adding new ones discovered from one's faith journey. In this way, faith has the ongoing capacity to reconstructs itself, like the cleaning out of one's attic and moving on to a new phase, often to be tested and refined again in a subsequent crisis. We keep and add to what we find to be true and reject what we do not. Yet only a few of us move on in this way. Most, perhaps reluctant to shed old traditions or teachings, are disabled from change and stay, spiritually, the same, while others, unable or unwilling to wrestle with God, reject the faith they had without replacing it. We have to give up something of ourselves to grow, but what we gain is far greater. Maturation through Fowler's stages of faith is like a pyramid, only the most resolute reaching the final stage, like Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther, or Mother Theresa. Incidentally, Fowler never proposes that salvation is earned by maturing in faith; all stages lie open to the same saving grace of God.

The pain experienced in crisis, then, is the thing that moves us forward. The Bible itself demonstrates, especially in the Old Testament, how this is so. The most compelling feature of the biblical record, it turns out, are the very pieces that least interest us—those long genealogical lists of “begat.” Narrative, the story line, only comes into play when there is some disjuncture in the line of succession: barrenness perhaps, or the issue of twins—which one shall carry the line, or the death of the oldest son. It's in such times that the story line resumes to narrate how the problem is solved and the line resumed. Crisis, then, interrupts the line until the issue is resolved.

Over and over again in the Bible we read how life's crises test and often temper faith. *Life* is the pain that comes with it, as well as its joys. In a National Geographic Explorer piece some time ago, four friends set out on an often harrowing voyage down the Yukon River in Alaska. Toward the end of their 1,500 mile journey things got very tense on their homemade raft, with contrary winds that pushed them back up river, grizzlies stalking the banks, and having to stand waist deep in glacial waters pushing their cumbersome craft off sand banks for hours in the perennially shifting river. They came within a hair's breadth of quitting, but they hung in there. At the end of the journey in the Bearing Sea, one of the four, speaking of life in general, but certainly of the voyage, said, “[Life] is all the stuff that happens to you while you're trying to get there.” Who would

argue with that. Yet wouldn't you agree that they were all likely newly formed and differently aligned to the world, and perhaps to God, for the experience?

Unless the pain is unrelenting, as in a sickness unto death, we grow as we allow ourselves to be taught by our pain and trials; we grow into something better, fuller, wiser. If we do not learn from our pain we are liable to miss both the maturing it offers and the God who wishes to be found in the midst of it. This was Jesus' point to those who survived the falling of the tower of Siloam, and those killed by Pilate's soldiers. Unless we learn how frail this life is, how transient, we will miss the invitation to turn toward God and embrace God in fellowship, service, and redemption.

It is true to say that we could not survive well without pain. It seems to be God's strange gift to us in the process of evolution that keeps us from harm. Without its warning signs—a stab of pain, the threat of burning fire or numbing cold, a torn muscle or an abdominal pain—we stand in danger of the threat consuming us, like the wax winged Icarus flying into the sun.

Pain is not a punishment; it is God's alarm, a summons to safety, and an invitation to companionship that promises to share even the worst of the journey.

Amen.