

The Great Equalizer

Mark 1:40-45

When the day is long and the night, the night is yours alone,
When you're sure you've had enough of this life, well hang on
Don't let yourself go, 'cause everybody cries and everybody hurts sometimes
(from *Everybody Hurts* lyrics by Peter Buck, recorded by R.E.M, 1993)

I got a call from my son yesterday morning. It seems that he had waked up with some severe back pain. Having been there myself, it was easy to be sympathetic and I even had a few helpful suggestions. Pain is a great equalizer. It comes to us regardless of age, whether we're male or female, or rich or poor. Often, the more wealthy we are, the more resources we use to avoid pain. But all of us work hard to avoid it.

Physical pain is not something most of us like and we generally want it to stop hurting as soon as possible. But pain does serve a useful purpose in our lives. It lets us know something is wrong, that something is not right with our bodies. Similarly, emotional pain alerts us that something is wrong in our lives.

Pain often signals that there is a problem. So, is it fair to say pain is a good thing? Does it serve a useful purpose? What lessons do we learn from pain? We learn what not to touch, such as a hot stove or an electrical outlet. We learn what to avoid, such as a bad financial investment or a destructive relationship. Well, well sometimes we learn!

We celebrate with joy the presence of so many young adults in our congregation. Many of them were involved in the planning and leading of worship this morning. We also celebrate the presence and involvement of many youth, children, and young families -- all ages in the life of our church. Their presence brings joy to the rest of us who are not as young. Their presence gives us reason to hope in the future of this congregation.

Along with this joy, however, there is some pain. At the same time we celebrate the joy of hope for the future, we are reminded that many of the rest of us are getting older. That in itself is not a bad thing. Getting older is just a thing, but pain results when we start to borrow identity – a sense of ourselves – from these young people. Pain comes when our need to feel young and hopeful causes any of us to live out of touch with the tremendous worth and value of each of our lives -- what we have to give at each stage of our lives.

There was a tragic plane crash this past week that offers us a harsh reminder of the presence of pain and need in our world. This was in stark contrast to the joy we felt as we celebrated the safe landing of another flight on the Hudson River just a month ago. There is no doubt that we live in the tension between pain and joy.

Jesus lived with pain. As we know him from the gospel accounts, he was sensitive to the needs of others. Hurting people came to him. He healed them and offered forgiveness. He heard them, saw them, and included them. Jesus knew the world's need and felt the world's pain. He felt compassion for need, pain, and suffering. At the same time, he

could get pretty tough toward powerful people who causing suffering. Jesus could cause some pain of his own!

Jesus knew that pain and need were great equalizers in life, yet he was not distracted by the pain around him. He did not forget who he was and did not neglect his own needs while feeling the needs of others. He did not lose track of his overall mission, goal, and calling.

Today's gospel story is about a man with leprosy. The disease of leprosy was a tragedy. It was a death sentence and meant being ostracized from one's community. It was seen as God's judgment against the victim who became both ritually unclean and culturally unwelcome – cut off from God and community.

A man with leprosy came to Jesus seeking healing. He came with great trust in Jesus' power to heal. In response, Jesus was "deeply moved." Figuratively, his intestines became all twisted up with sorrow, sympathy, and the desire to help. Jesus touched him and the leprosy disappeared. The man was completely cured. Jesus, as expected, reminded him about his obligation at the temple – the ritual cleansing that would restore him to community and relationship with God. He also said something unexpected, "Say nothing to anybody about this healing. Don't let anyone know it was I who healed you!"

Why didn't Jesus want anyone to know? While we're at it with questions, why didn't Jesus just heal everyone? Why would God not just get rid of disease, war, bigotry, and poverty altogether? Why does God allow disease and all the rest continue in the world? These are huge questions and, in terms of an answer, I must confess that I don't really know.

The only answer I offer at this point is that, somehow, pain is an important part of how life works. Somehow, when we can look into the face of suffering -- our own and another's – the process can change us. When we know that need and feel that pain, it can make possible the space for a new birth to happen – for the Kingdom of God to be born.

The dream of God in Jesus was the kingdom of God: *shalom*, the oneness of all creation. Empathy toward another's need is a vital way to move us toward that goal. The quest for justice and peace needs to be in response to the need and pain of people. Social justice ministry can meet critical needs and change unjust systems. It can also draw us closer to people and bring us more in touch with our true selves. Looking into the face of the leper in front of us, and within us, we can see ourselves in the face of Christ.

John Howard Griffin, who is best known as the author of the novel *Black Like Me*, was also the official biographer for Thomas Merton. He recalled the time in the early 1960's when a young priest from Mississippi came to speak with Merton. The priest was feeling tormented by the segregation of the churches in his area. He had a tremendous feeling of guilt: "What can I do?" Merton, in his typically sensitive and spiritual way, said, "Don't do a damned thing! Take the time to become what you profess to be, then you will know what to do." (John Howard Griffin, *Thomas Merton: the Hermitage Years*)

One of the mysteries of life is that we find our true selves when we face our pain, embrace our need, and recognize and respect the pain and needs of the world around us. How do you act on your passion for social justice? There are many ways. You can get to know people in the community around this church building or perhaps the community in which you live. You can learn about other cultures and nations who have had a history of violence, injustice, and oppression. You can visit a third world country or become more familiar with our own country's trade policies – especially arms trade. Another way is to simplify your lifestyle or becoming more active politically or in organizing work through your congregation.

Crossroads is more than a collection of individuals. It is a community of faith on a journey together. If we are to discover who we are, who God is, and find the Spirit's presence at work in the world, we need to see the world's pain and feel the world's need. Jesus did not use healing to impress people, to gain followers, or to grow a movement. He just responded to the need he saw and the pain he felt. He acted to relieve suffering.

That's why he told the man not to tell everyone that Jesus healed him. "Then I'll be a rock star! Everyone will come to me wanting to get something rather than wanting me -- rather than wanting to follow the path I'm walking. They'll miss the whole point. Leprosy is not good. Pain, need, and suffering are not good things. Poverty is not a blessing. In fact, the best way to make yourself invisible in this world is to become poor. (Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*)

More important than curing disease, eliminating poverty, or taking away pain is learning to see the poor around us. It is to awaken to the need of those with whom we share life. Everybody hurts. We all lose loved ones, lose good health, and in these tough economic times, lose confidence in our future. We lose confidence in our dreams – maybe lose a business we've started or lose a job we always thought we'd have. We tend to get so wrapped up in our pain and need, wanting God to fix it, that we lose track of the space that is shaped when we looked into the faces of those in pain – when we confess that "everybody hurts."

In that space, we find not only a community of shared humanity, but also that God meets us in that space. And that space is at the foot of the cross where our pain and need meet God's brokenness, weakness, and pain. The mystery of life is that the God of all life waits for us there at that crossroad -- and perhaps nowhere else.

As we follow Jesus on the journey of our lives, we are invited to know the world's needs and feel the world's pain. Let us commit ourselves to work for social justice and peace. More than that, we are invited to know the world's needy and confess our own need. We are invited to notice the ones in pain and to embrace our own pain. As we work in partnership with God and the community of faith. Along the journey of mystery and pain, we find ourselves animated by the Spirit of God and not by "the spirit of getting ahead in the world." (adapted from sermon by Bishop Oscar Romero, 1977)

Lord, draw compassion from us as we seek to know you in the faces of those in need.
Lord, have mercy on us as we seek to find ourselves in the shared pain of common
humanity. Let us see you and work with you to fill this world with your justice. Amen.