

Embracing the Pain

John 17:1-11 – May 24th Sermon

There is an old Four Tops song called “I Can’t Help Myself,” or better known as the “Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch” song. I’d play it for you but with copyright laws we’d get kicked off of Facebook. I’d sing for you but then you might kick me off. The song goes, “I can’t help myself, I love you and nobody else.” The singer goes on to croon, “You snap your fingers or wink your eye, I come running to you.” Sometimes we have obsessions we just find impossible to resist.

I don’t know about everyone else, but these days I am finding it difficult to avoid looking at the news, especially as it relates to our current struggles. First thing in the morning, before I go to bed, and times in-between, I am looking at my phone. I don’t believe that is a healthy use of my time. I know I need to focus more on being in the moment, but as the song says, “I Can’t Help Myself.”

But sometimes it is just too much. A week ago, I found myself reading a story written by a mother who had lost her beautiful and gifted 33-year-old daughter to the Coronavirus. I made it about halfway through the story before I just quit reading it. I just found it so painful to comprehend how any parent can go on when they lose a daughter and were not even able to be with her in her final moments.

I have done a lot of thinking these past couple of weeks about how we can find more balance in our lives.

- How do we find the balance between being a compassionate person and just enjoying the life we have?
- Just as important, how do we allow ourselves to grieve our own losses and continue to make room for pleasure and joy in what we still have?
- It seems that some people are more deeply affected by suffering in themselves and in others, while others manage to glide above the surface of suffering.

There is that scene from the Monty Python dark comedy movie, “Life of Brian,” where people are being crucified on crosses to die a painful death, and they all break out into song together, “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.” It makes me smile to think about that. Perhaps that is so funny because it is absurd how far some of us will go to stay above grief and pain.

And yet, we know that pain and times of suffering are part of what makes us human beings, and something that keeps us connected to each other. To cut yourself off from pain and suffering is to cut yourself off from experiences that can deepen the meaning of our lives and our connection to others. In fact, the same receptors that experience pain are the same receptors that experience pleasure. The same walls you construct to block off the world’s suffering or to block off your own suffering are the same walls that will block out pleasure as well. Some people live an entire lifetime avoiding facing some pain in their past and have no idea how much goodness in this world they have missed out on.

Most of the great religions of the world grew out of suffering.

- Buddhism began when over-privileged Prince Siddhartha, protected from his birth from suffering, saw a sick man, an old man, and a dead man for the first time and journeyed to dedicate his life to easing the pain of others.
- Judaism has as its central story the oppression of the Jewish people enslaved in Egypt.
- Islam began when the prophet Muhammad prayed to God for a solution to the tribal wars that ripped people apart in pain.
- Christianity began with Jesus's own pain in the desert, and spoke to a people oppressed by Rome. And then there is His painful death on a cross.¹

Today, in chapter 17 in John's gospel, we find Jesus praying for His disciples. John has a very different version of Jesus praying before His death than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Those three gospels all include Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where He prays that, if it is possible, God will find a way to take the suffering that is now before Him. According to Luke, Jesus prays for Himself so intensely that He sweats blood. John's gospel has no scene of Jesus praying in the garden where Jesus pleads that He can be saved suffering. Rather than praying for Himself, in John's gospel, Jesus prays for His disciples and then for all future believers, which includes each of you.

Each of these scriptures has gifts for us who struggle to know how to deal with suffering.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke show us what it means to pray honestly, to embrace our suffering, not run from it, and to ask God for what we want. It also reveals what happens when suffering is embraced, as Jesus comes to terms to accept what is about to happen, trusting Himself not to the life He wanted but to God. The scripture teaches us that we cannot always avoid suffering and that suffering can be redemptive. Most people might prefer this version of Jesus praying as we see Him as so very human, like us. In other words, we find One who can be with us in our suffering because He has been there before.

But I find John's portrayal of Jesus praying just as assuring. In John's gospel, Jesus has fully embraced what is about to happen to Himself. He understands that God has a plan, and He trusts that God knows what is best. So in John's gospel, we hardly see the suffering of Jesus, we see rather the pain of the disciples who are suffering grief at the thought of losing Jesus. Rather than praying for Himself, Jesus prays for them. He enters completely in solidarity with them. He prays that God will protect them, keep them in the truth, and unify them with God and to each other. In John's gospel, we experience something we all long for: to have someone be with us in our darkest time, to not be absorbed in themselves, but present for us.

When Earl was facing his second cancer surgery, he was not sure how to prepare. He was not a churchgoer, having burned out on God in parochial school. So he sat in the spot of sunlight in his office instead, straightening out his papers so no one would have

a hard time finding things while he was gone. When two of his grown children found him sitting at that desk on the day before his surgery, they asked if they could lay hands on him.

Unable to think of a polite way to say no, he let them, holding very still as one of them laid both hands on his hot round head, and the other pressed down on both of his shoulders hard enough for him to know how heavy love could be. The three of them stayed that way for what was either a long time or not time at all. In that posture, it was hard to tell. Nothing was said, during or after. It was only years later that Earl would bring it up, saying, "Remember that day you touched me in the sunlight? I still remember that day."ⁱⁱⁱ

So where do we find that balance? How do we continue to live in a world of suffering - ours and that of others - without denying suffering but continuing to embrace the gifts of life as well? I believe we follow the example of Jesus, who knew how to pray through His suffering and who knew how to pray through the suffering of others. He reveals to us how to embrace the reality of pain and transform it by giving it to God.

There is a simple Buddhist practice we can modify as Christians, which I believe can help us immensely. They learn to breathe in the suffering they feel themselves or the sufferings they see others experiencing and then let it go. One practice is to breathe in, saying with compassion, "Hello pain. I know you are there." Then breathe out that pain, saying, "I am here for you."

As a Christian, I invite you to do this with a modification for our own faith. Breathe in pain, maybe the pain we are seeing in the world or ourselves, and acknowledge it with compassion. Then as you breathe out the pain, you are transformed in the loving arms of Christ our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "An Altar in the World," chapter 10, *The Practice of Feeling Pain*."

ⁱⁱ Ibid.