

## **“Where is God when we suffer”**

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We say, "It is God's will" and "God took the baby." But we label as sociopaths those who cause pain, kill or kidnap. We ask, "Where is God?" when we experience the brokenness of divorce, when someone we love is diagnosed with Alzheimer's and when a child or mother dies at birth. Pain and death tarnish the image of an all-powerful God who embodies love.

But pain is part of the human condition. Its measurement is the fifth vital sign, added by nurses to the traditional pulse, temperature, blood pressure and respiratory rate. To live is to endure pain, and to live is to die. Pain and death are not evil. Their only meaning is that we are creatures and not God. But if pain is unavoidable, is suffering also part of God's plan? We can have physical pain and not suffer, and we can suffer and not have physical pain, because many cancer patients say if their pain were relieved, they would still suffer. So if pain is the fifth vital sign, suffering should be the sixth vital sign.

In his letter to the Romans 5:1-8, Paul answers, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The Greek word for peace is the closest that language has to the Hebrew word "shalom." And shalom is more than freedom from conflict. Shalom means wholeness through well-being, flourishing and community. But how do we move from suffering to shalom?

Jerome Groupman writes, "There is a profound human need to believe there is a future better than the present. Hope is the ability to see a path to this future." Paul tells the Romans that Jesus is the hopeful path. In the midst of suffering, "God's love is poured into our hearts," and "hope does not disappoint." But we might ask, "Is God's path of hope elimination of pain? Or instead is God's path of hope the loving presence which eliminates all loneliness?" I propose pain only causes suffering when accompanied by a feeling of abandonment.

We are lulled into apathy because we think suffering is God's desire, and we are overwhelmed by all the suffering we see each day. So we distance ourselves from those

who suffer. We gloss over suffering by refusing to visit those in the hospital. We say, "When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when we're feeling sad, we simply remember our favorite things, and then we don't feel so bad." No wonder those with cancer tell me what stresses them most is not physical pain but isolation.

Are we not comforted when someone acknowledges our pain? The presence of another in our pain is a gift. "God proves his love for us," because God is the one who both feels nails in his flesh and at the same time is the parent of a son who dies. In the dark night of the soul, even if we lose our belief in God, God still believes in us. And when we recognize God's presence in our pain, God's Spirit transforms our pain from one of those times when we "lose our Jesus" into an experience of fellowship with God.

But if God's presence does not always stop our pain, what good is it? I tell my patients I am absolutely certain God visits neither pain nor death to punish or instruct. Some tell me later the most important thing to happen in my office was not the chemotherapy but when they heard for the first time that God loves them. Good news erases the fear and despair that result from isolation from God and each other.

In the midst of pain and death, God's presence gives hope. And God's hope gives courage. God's presence transforms the hopelessness of Good Friday into the creativity of Easter morning. God puts on the weakness of human flesh, so that through Jesus' pain and death, God can reveal the lengths to which God is willing to go. Jesus can be nailed to wood, can bleed and can die. And through God's resurrection of Jesus, we learn no one is beyond the power of God's love and reconciliation.

Pain and death are not marks of God's abandonment. We rejoice, and maybe even boast, for God is present in our pain and death, giving us hope in Jesus' resurrection. We can now say, "Pain and death, where are your sting?"