Ouch! That Hurt

A sermon by Jackie Clement
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On Wednesday, I wandered into Samantha's office and announced that I had sermonic woes. What was I thinking when I planned a sermon on suffering for the weekend after Thanksgiving when everyone was in a spirit of celebration? After 12 Sundays of preaching happiness, what had suddenly possessed me to alter course so drastically? My own suffering aside, the clock was ticking its way right through the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and the National Dog Show and too many helpings of turkey and mashed potatoes and the annual fight with the siblings and the dinner table with that one empty place, and oh yeah, that's what I was thinking.

Holidays are wonderful things and they call us into a spirit of sharing and being together in much needed ways. But that is not to say that holidays are not without their hurts, the smaller hurts of eating too much, the lingering wounds of harsh words shared at other family occasions, the deep abiding hurt of missing the people who are not sitting at the table this year. Holidays are wonderful things, but they do not call us out of life with all its pains. At best, I guess, holidays like Thanksgiving call us to acknowledge the suffering of the world, and to live in the knowledge that suffering can exist at the same time as celebration, to know that life holds both joy and pain. It calls us to that wider vision that Rebecca Parker credits with saving her life.

This is not to deny the pain, to smother the suffering under tinsel trimmings of gaiety, but to open our hearts so that both may be true and we may hold the entirety of experience in our living. One could say that this is the fundamental religious quest—to acknowledge the fullness of human experience, to understand it, to make meaning of it and to embrace it. As delightful as it has been to plumb the depths of happiness for 12 weeks, a religion that does not acknowledge the presence of suffering in the world and in every life, offers us no way to integrate the full human experience, to face life and to thrive. Religion and questions of why suffering exists and how to live in the face of suffering are closely intertwined. The Buddha's quest was one to understand and overcome suffering. The Hebrew Bible begins with the story of how suffering came into the world. The center of the Christian story is in Christ's suffering and death.

One of the very important questions in a religious understanding of suffering is where we find comfort in the winters of our discontent. Rebecca Parker found the wider vision that convinced her to live through the actions and art of other people. Many of us do. Nancy Wood, author of our responsive reading, finds comfort in the natural world. Many of us do. The hymnist who wrote Precious Lord, finds strength in the presence of God. Many of us do. Wider vision, comfort and strength are to be found in different ways, as individual as theology, as unique as our sorrows.

All of these things—wider vision, comfort and strength—allow us to (in Rebecca Parker's words) "hold everything with a decision to live." And this is the beginning of healing, for wider vision, comfort and strength, as necessary as they are, are not healing itself. They are not the transformation or in religious language the redemption that we would hope for.
Redemption is a curious word. It really only has one basic meaning—to regain something by trading something else for it, but the nuances of meaning are many. The traditional theological

meaning is to be saved from sin or evil, the most obvious example being the idea that Jesus, as the son of God, was sent to redeem humanity from their sins. But redemption is also a very human act. In the Hebrew Bible you also find the word used to describe the actions of humans such as buying back their family's land. Although embedded in deeply theological stories, redemption is the product of human intention to save the community.

Kathleen McTigue has a delightful story about bicycling past a small church on Mount Dessert Island off the coast of Maine. A sign outside the church boldly declared "Backside Redemption." She pondered the meaning of this sign for some time. She was intrigued by a church who would admit that the type of redemption it offered was of the back sided variety, that is, the redemption that comes to us by error, by serendipity, in the ways and times and places we did not mean to find redemption. It took a few minutes of pondering before she noticed a small recycling center behind the church. She then realized that the sign referred, not to the church, but to the recycling center and that backside referred, not to unintended consequences, but to the fact that it was on the side of the island facing the mainland.

Still, the sign spoke to her in a deeper way and she writes this:

> *The little church and the recycling center offer a lovely serendipity—both have to do with redemption. What happens when we recycle bottles and cans? They are transformed; they are made into something else. Though it may seem a homely analogy for something as lofty as our souls, that's exactly what we're after. In our inconsistent and often clumsy ways, we're aiming for transformation.*

This is the sense of redemption as I am using it here, when we are saved from our own shortcomings, from the ways we break relationship with what we know to be good and true and life affirming. This is not a redemption that comes from somewhere outside ourselves. Though it is often triggered by outside forces, it is only transformative when we own it and make changes within. The salvation we receive in this is to be returned to right relationship with our true selves, with the world and with the Holy. This is a kind of healing that can be influenced and supported and even demanded from forces outside ourselves, but ultimately takes place within.

So, let me say right out that suffering is not redemptive. It is not healing and transformative in the best sense of those words. Pain holds the possibility of greater understanding, but equally pain can obscure insight. Suffering can help us know ourselves and our capabilities better, but equally it can beat us down and blind us to our true selves. Sorrow can offer the possibility of seeing new joy, but equally it can erase joy.

It is a common idea that the pains of life—as much as its joys—develop or indeed even create the soul. The poet Keats called life a "vale of soul-making" wherein all the experiences, good and bad, had the single purpose of creating a depth of being that made us whole. You can see how this would be a comforting idea. While it doesn't lessen or remove the sorrows of life, it at least gives them purpose. But here's what Howard Thurman, the great Baptist educator and theologian, wrote about the concept that suffering develops the soul:

…in this idea lies a very certain danger; namely that the specific pain is sent into the life to perform a ministry in the life of the individual. This idea is current among those who say in the presence of tragedy, "We bow humbly before the will of God." But this idea is deadly because it

yields the mind to a kind of fatalism of despair and futility which stunts the spirit and destroys the basic faith in the goodness and the wisdom of God.

What Thurman is saying here is that the idea of redemption being inherent in suffering is not only wrong, but dangerous. The idea that suffering redeems us comes from the idea that Christ suffered and died to save humanity from our sins. It is known as the Doctrine of Atonement, but even before there was such a thing as systematic theology, the writers of the Bible were counseling early Christians to not only identify with, but rejoice in sharing Christ's suffering.

Here's how 1 Peter counsels Christians under persecution:

> *... if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.* (1:20-21)
>
> *...rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings* (4:13)

Here, suffering is made out to be something worthy because it brings you closer to God. This is, as Howard Thurman pointed out, a dangerous idea. Here are a few of the sentences that come before and after the Bible's admonishment to rejoice in your suffering.

> *Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.* (1:18)
>
> *Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct...* (3:1)

This is where the idea of redemptive suffering moves from dangerous to deadly. The book *Proverbs of Ashes* by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker was written to "show how emphasizing Christ's obedience to God and sacrifice on the cross sanctions violence, exacerbates its effects, blesses silence about the abuse of human beings, and hinders the process of recovery."[1] The reading this morning came from that book. Here is the quote that opens the book, spoken by a woman who sought pastoral counseling from Rebecca Parker:

> *"Mostly [my husband] is a good man. But sometimes he becomes very angry and he hits me. He knocks me down. One time he broke my arm and I had to go to the hospital... I went to my priest twenty years ago. I've been trying to follow his advice. The priest said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus... He said, "If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross."* —Lucia

It is a conversation that has been going on a long time, but it seems that it is one that continues to be necessary. *Proverbs of Ashes* was published at the opening of the 21st century. Howard Thurman wrote about the dangers of seeing suffering as redemptive in the middle of the 20th century. In the 19th century Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou argued that it was not the death of Jesus but the example of his life that held power for human transformation. Ballou's younger

[1] Brock, Rita and Rebecca Parker, Beacon Press, 2001 back cover

contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson argued it from the Unitarian side saying, "by his holy thoughts, Jesus serves us, and thus only." Ballou and Emerson are echoing still much earlier ideas. 12th century theologian Pierre Abelard said in his Moral Influence theory that the essential power of Jesus' atonement lay in God's love not in suffering.

How many more centuries will we have this conversation before we can set aside the idea that we are saved through suffering? If transformation comes it will be not through suffering, but through our resistance to suffering. It will be from ability to make life affirming meaning out of suffering. To live in this world knowing that suffering will always be a part of life, but to find joy anyway. To witness to our own pain and the pain of others without running. To offer compassion and love to ourselves and to others. To live in ways that do not increase our own suffering and that of others. These are the things that will make us whole and make us free.

Since it was a week of sermonic woes, I'm going to let Bill Schulz, head of the UU Service Committee, finish this sermon. This comes from a lecture to the Ministers Association and although the title was "What Torture's Taught Me" I think you can replace the word 'torture' with 'suffering' in this passage and retain the meaning.

> *What torture has taught me, what all those brave souls and, yes, even a few of their tormentors, have taught me, is to never give up on the glimmers of grace for not everything is all that it seems. If even survivors of torture can reclaim a sense of life's bounty, then surely you and I and all to whom we minister can too. If the torturer cannot fully break the human spirit, nobody can. For we Unitarian Universalists know, out of the depths of our faith and the teachings of our tradition and the succor of our community, that the chess master was right.*
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> *Chancing upon a great painting in a European gallery of a defeated Faust sitting opposite the devil at a chess table with only a knight and a King on the board and the King in check, the master stopped to stare. The minutes changed to hours and still the master stared. And then finally, "It's a lie," he shouted. "The King and the knight have another move! They have another move!" And that's finally what torture has taught me—that it is not just the King but the knight, not just the Queen but the rook, not just the Bishop but the pawn, not just the wealthy but the pauper, not just the fortunate but the weary, not just the torturer but the tortured, not just the powerful but every single person, every single blessed person, until the day we die, every single blessed person on this earth, every single blessed person who has another move. We all have another move.*

This is the wider vision that saves—to live in the knowledge that suffering can exist at the same time as celebration, to know that life holds both joy and pain. Suffering does not get to have the power of redemption. We all have another move.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.