Sunday, March 17, 1991
WHEN YOU HAVEN'T GOT TIME FOR PAIN
John 3:14-21

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour." (John 12:27)

Most of us can identify with Jesus when he said, "Now my soul is troubled." Is there anyone listening who has not experienced suffering and pain — be it mental or physical, or both? We know the pain of grief, loneliness, guilt, illness, mental depression, betrayal, broken relationships, shattered dreams, and more.

It's part of our human nature to want to escape as much pain or suffering as possible. But even more so in our present time, when there are so many pain-killing drugs, there is a strong tendency to try to avoid any kind of suffering, even minor pain, and that's not always good. In his best-selling book Anatomy of an Illness, Norman Cousins wrote: "For years we have had it drummed into us — in print, on radio, over television, in everyday conversation — that any hint of pain is to be banished as though it were the ultimate evil. As a result," said Cousins, "we are becoming a nation of pill-grabbers and hypochondriacs, escalating the slightest ache into a searing ordeal." Perhaps you saw the commercial advertisement for a popular pain killer — it said, "When you haven't got time for the pain."

But there are certain kinds of pains and suffering that we had better have time for because of the messages they are trying to give us. And if we simply try to get rid of or avoid the pain before we understand its message, we can get into even deeper trouble.

Listen to Norman Cousins again: "About 90% of pain is self-limiting. It is not always an indication of poor health, and most frequently it is the result of tension, stress, worry, idleness, boredom, diet, smoking, excessive drinking, inadequate exercise, stale air, or any one of a number of other abuses encountered by the human body in modern society. Pain is not the enemy; rather, it is a signal to us that something is wrong."

The most ignored fact of all about a lot of pain is that the best way to eliminate it is to eliminate the abuse. Instead, too many people reach too quickly for painkillers — aspirin, barbiturates, codeine, tranquilizers, sleeping pills, and dozens of other analgesics or desensitizing drugs — or they turn to smoking or alcohol, or some other substance as a way of killing, escaping, or avoiding the pain. We not only use such things to avoid physical pain but also the pain of broken relationships.

The physicians I talk with are deeply troubled by the extent to which the medical profession today is taking on the character of a pain-killing industry rather than a healing profession. They tell me that their offices are filled with people who are anxious because they believe something dreadful is about to happen to them because of some new ache or pain they are experiencing. And patients tend to feel indignant or insulted if they are told that no organic cause can be found for the pain, and they feel even more indignant if some medicine is not prescribed for them to get rid of the pain.

We all need to be reminded that many forms of pain have no underlying physical cause but are the result, as mentioned earlier, of the abuse of ourselves, and the pain is simply warning us that we are abusing ourselves in some fashion. So we'd better have time for the pain, at least

enough time so that we can begin to understand its message and take the appropriate action. More often than not, pain is a friend trying to tell us something that we need to hear but maybe do not want to hear.

If, for example, an athlete does not pay attention to pain but rather too quickly turns to a painkiller, he or she could cause long-term or permanent damage to the body. If a baseball pitcher did not pay attention to his sore arm but instead took painkillers and continued to pitch anyway, irreparable harm could be the result.

There's another side to what we do with pain. We can also pay too much attention to it. Most of us know there are times when pain can deter us from doing something that needs to be done. Very few, if any, individuals feel like getting out of bed and walking a few steps following surgery. Those first few steps can be painful. But we know that if we want to regain our strength, we need some exercise, even though it first hurts to try. If we pay close attention to the pain, it can keep us from overdoing it, but it is also necessary to endure some pain in order to get well more quickly. We've all heard the saying—"there is no gain without pain."

The same is true with the pain of grief. When a loved one dies, we can use the pain of grief as an excuse for too long a time, and it can keep us from being with people and doing other things that can be helpful in dealing with the pain of grief. By paying too much attention to grief, we never get through it.

What then does all of this have to do with our Christian faith? I believe it is instructive for us on several levels.

On one level, our faith, with its Hebrew Old Testament heritage, has always maintained that body, mind, and spirit are one. We human beings are not simply mechanical devices like an automobile, which needs only mechanical repair from time to time. We are rather children of God with built-in healing capabilities which, if encouraged and not interfered with, can go a long way in keeping us healthy.

Our Christian faith also reminds us that we need to pay attention to our spiritual health as well as our physical health because they are intertwined. We are spiritual beings, and when our spirits are nourished and healthy, it affects our whole self for the better. We need meaning in our living if we are to be healthy in every respect. We need to be aware of and cultivate our connection with God because this dimension adds a quality, depth, and joy to our living that can come to us in no other way.

The cultivation of this relationship with God can give us an attitude toward life that in itself is health-giving. It doesn't mean that pain and suffering will not come our way, but it does mean that we have the power and strength to deal with them and that we will be stronger for it.

On another level, taking time for the pain, paying attention to what our suffering is telling us, is instructive for how we deal with life itself — both our joys and our troubles.

One day, when Jesus and the disciples were on their way to another village, Jesus asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" They answered, "Some say that you are John the Baptist, others that you are Elijah, still others, another one of the prophets." Then Jesus got personal; he asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

Jesus then began to tell them that he would undergo great suffering, rejection, and death, but that he would rise again after three days. Peter didn't like that kind of talk. He didn't want to hear anything about pain and suffering. However, Jesus warned all of them they'd better find time for the pain. He said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." And Jesus continued by adding—"Those who try to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will save them."

Jesus didn't want to get followers under false pretenses. Whenever you give yourself over to some higher purpose or when you commit yourself to another person in marriage or friendship — there is a joy that comes into your life that can be had in no other way, but you are also taking the risk of suffering and pain. You'd better have time for the pain as well. It cannot be avoided. If you want to dream, and I hope all of us have our dreams, then we also need to take time for the pain that comes when some of our dreams are shattered. Is it better not to dream in order to avoid the pain?

Jesus said, "I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Unless one dies to selfishness, our life remains a single one and one never risks the pain of a broken relationship because you do not have any significant relationships. But if one dies to selfishness, you are able to connect with other people, you are able to risk, and then life takes on an added quality and bears much fruit. But you also open yourself to pain and suffering. To put it another way, it is not impossible to live life selfishly — but what an impossible life it is if you don't have time for the pain.

On still another level in our living, it is only when we take time for the pain that we can truly come through it. This is especially true of the pain of grief, but it is also true in other parts of life as well.

The pain and suffering that comes with grief simply take time. When someone you love dies, or moves away, or is gone from your life for whatever reason, it takes time for healing. When people try to avoid it, gloss over it, or not give in to it, they are not able to come through grief to the other side of it.

During my 34 years as an ordained minister, I have conducted hundreds and hundreds of funerals, and thus I have been with an equal number of families as they began to deal with their loss and the suffering that came with it. I remember one funeral where a young woman, aged 36, died suddenly of a heart attack. She and her husband had been married for nine years and had three children. After the funeral, I was alone with the husband at their home, and his grief was very deep. He asked over and over again, "Why, why did this happen?" I didn't have any adequate answer, certainly none that could remove his grief. Finally, after a long silence, I was able to say, "Howard, I don't know how Sarah's death fits into the ultimate will of God. I do know that one reason your suffering is so great is that you two loved each other so much. And I also know that God still has a will and purpose for your life now that this has happened."

A little over a year later, I got a letter from Howard. He remembered little of what I had said at the funeral service. But he did remember our conversation after the funeral. He said in his letter, "I still remember what you said that day as we talked. You told me, 'God has a will and purpose for your life now that this has happened.' At least that gave me a place to begin, and I am now on the way." In his letter, he also said that even though his suffering had been deep, he would not have traded his nine years of a loving relationship with his wife in order to avoid the suffering. This man was able to come through his grief because he took time for the pain.

Taking time for the pain also means that we are able to make sacrifices for the sake of growth. Significant growth and change in our lives can be time-consuming and sometimes painful, but a responsible person is willing to make that kind of investment. There are no quick fixes or simple magic formulas that make this life easy. Growth is frequently costly and often has some pain involved. Habits are never easy to change. Jesus reminded us over and over again that growth in mind and spirit takes endurance. As growing persons, we need to be willing to play through the pain to a higher and better level of life.

Taking time for the pain means that we are willing to risk new behavior. Significant life change comes only when we are willing to put ourselves on the line in new patterns of life and behavior. It is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting.

Jesus said, “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”

A troubled soul, pain, suffering — these are not our enemies, but rather friendly messengers to lead us into a new way of life. God is often working in us through them. Amen.