Sunday, March 16, 1997
WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM PAIN
John 12:20-33

In his book, When God Whispers Your Name, Max Lucado writes, “Spray paint won’t fix rust. A band-aid won’t remove a tumor. Wax on the hood won’t cure the cough of an engine. If the problem is inside, you have to go inside.”

Max Lucado said he learned this lesson when he returned to his office one morning after a vacation. He remembered there had been a break-in some weeks before, so he cautiously disarmed the security system and then rearmed it when he went to his desk. He had no sooner sat down when the alarm went off.

He turned the system off and then rearmed it once more. By the time he returned to his desk, the alarm went off again. The alarm company called, and Max told them someone was trying to break in or that there was a malfunction with the system. The patient voice on the phone suggested that perhaps Max was the one setting off the alarm because of the motion detectors. “Motion detectors?” he asked, “What do they do?” By the time this was explained, the police had arrived, and Max had to explain, “I think the problem is on the inside, not the outside.”

Max said he learned a valuable lesson: “You can’t fix an inside problem by going outside... I spent an hour hiding from thieves who weren’t there, faulting a system that hadn’t failed, and calling for help I didn’t need.”

God has created us in such a way that we have built-in alarm systems. On our life’s journey, we need to pay attention to those alarm systems when they go off. Pain is one of those valuable alarms, and there’s much we can learn from how Jesus dealt with his pain and suffering as we travel our own journey through life. Too often, we try to fix pain only by treating the symptoms on the outside, wanting to get rid of the pain as quickly and easily as possible, rather than working on what’s happening inside.

As Jesus was nearing the end of his public ministry and saw the opposition growing against him, he said, “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me...’”

Most of us can identify with Jesus when he said, “Now my soul is troubled.” Is there anyone listening who hasn’t experienced suffering and pain — whether mental or physical, or both? We know the pain of loss, grief, loneliness, guilt, illness, betrayal, broken relationships, shattered dreams, and more.

It seems to be part of our human nature to want to escape as much pain or suffering as possible. Today, in a world with so many pain-relieving drugs, there’s an even stronger temptation to avoid any kind of suffering, even minor pain, and to treat it only on the outside with a band-aid approach rather than working on the inside.

In his bestselling 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, Cousins said, “We are becoming a nation of pill-grabbers and hypochondriacs, escalating the slightest ache

into a searing ordeal." I remember especially one commercial for a popular painkiller that said, "When you haven't got time for the pain."

There are certain kinds of pain and suffering that we had better have time for because of the messages they are trying to give us. If we too quickly try to get rid of or avoid the pain before we understand it, we may be in 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; it is rather a signal to us that something is wrong."

The most ignored fact 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 others. Many turn to tobacco, alcohol, or some other substance as a way of killing or escaping the pain. We use such things not only to avoid physical pain but also to escape the pain of broken relationships.

Physicians I talk with are deeply troubled by how the medical profession today is becoming more of a pain-killing industry rather than a healing profession. They tell me that their offices are filled with people anxious because they believe something dreadful is about to happen to them due to a new ache or pain. Rather than wanting to learn something about themselves from the pain, they only want medicine to quickly get rid of it.

Pain can be a friend, not an enemy. It's helpful to know whether there is an underlying physical cause, or if the pain comes from self-abuse or from some mental or spiritual issue we are reluctant to examine.

More often than not, pain is a messenger trying to tell us something we need to hear but do not want to hear.

For example, if an athlete does not pay attention to pain and instead turns too quickly to a painkiller, they could cause long-term or even permanent damage to the body. If a baseball pitcher didn't pay attention to a sore arm but instead took painkillers and continued to pitch, irreparable harm could be the result.

There's another side to 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 in spite of the pain. Few individuals feel like getting out of bed and walking a few steps after surgery. Those steps can be painful. But we know that if we want to regain our strength, we need some exercise even though it hurts at first. If we pay close attention to the pain, it can keep us from overdoing it, but we must also endure some pain to get well more quickly. We've all heard the saying, "No pain, no gain."

The same is true of the pain of grief. When a loved one dies, we can use the pain of grief as an excuse for doing nothing for too long, and it can keep us from being with people and taking action that can help us deal 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 and how it helps us deal with the pain and suffering we meet on our life's journey? It is instructive 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 that needs only mechanical repair from time to time. We are children of God with built-in healing capabilities that, if encouraged and not interfered with, can go a long way toward keeping us healthy.

Therefore, on our journey through life, 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, we can learn from and deal with the pain we encounter in life more effectively.

We need to be aware of and cultivate our connection with God because this dimension adds a quality, a depth, and joy to our living, and it can help us learn from and come through pain.

Cultivating this relationship with God can give us an attitude toward life that is health-giving. It doesn't mean pain and suffering will not come our way, but it does mean that when they do, we will be able to face them and be stronger as a result.

On another level, taking time for the pain — paying attention to what our suffering is telling us — can help us deal constructively with the pain that is a part of life.

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, and still others say you are one of the prophets." Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

Then Jesus began to tell them that he would undergo great suffering, rejection, and death, but they didn't like that kind of talk. They didn't want to hear anything about pain and suffering. However, Jesus warned them that they had better find time for the pain, face it squarely, and learn from it.

He didn't want to have followers under false pretenses. Whenever you give yourself over to some higher purpose, or when you commit yourself to another person in friendship or marriage — there is both joy and pain. There are times when it is not possible to have one without the other.

If you have dreams, then you also need to take time for the pain that comes when some of your dreams are shattered. The other choice is to have no dreams at all and, therefore, no pain. As Jesus said, "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."

Now, let's translate that into the language of human relationships. Unless you die to selfishness, your life remains a single one and never risks the pain of a broken relationship because you will not have any significant relationships. But if you die to selfishness, you are able to connect with others, but then you are taking the risk of a failed relationship that can cause pain and suffering but can also bring joy and happiness.

On still another level, it is only when you face the pain in your life that you can come through it. This is especially true of the pain of grief.

When someone you love dies or leaves your life for any reason, it takes time for healing. If you try to cover up the pain or avoid it, you will not be able to come through the pain of grief to the other side.

During my almost 40 years of ministry, I have conducted hundreds of funerals, and I have been with many families and individuals as they dealt with the pain of loss and suffering that comes with it.

I remember one funeral where a young woman, age 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, and his grief was very deep. He asked over and over again, “Why did this happen?” I didn’t have an adequate answer, certainly none that could remove the pain of his grief. Finally, after a long silence, I was able to say, “Howard, I don’t know how Sarah’s sudden death fits into the ultimate will of God. I do know that one reason your suffering is so great is because you two loved each other so much and had so many good times together. 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 afterward. 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 my life despite Sarah’s sudden death, and you helped me understand why my pain was so deep so that I could face it, learn from it, and come through it. At least that gave me a place to begin, and I am now on the way.” He also said that even though his suffering had been deep, he would not have traded his nine years of loving Sarah in order to avoid the pain.

Learning from pain 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 it’s a sacrifice we’re willing to make because of the joy on the other side.

Being willing to learn from pain also means that we can have our deepest experience of the power and love of God at the same time we are in our deepest pain.

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, and suffering 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.