Book 33

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WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM PAIN

John 12:20-23

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 going to his office one morning after returning from 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 thought someone was trying to breakin so he turned the system off and then rearmed it once more. By the time he returned to his desk, the alarm went off again. Now the alarm company called and Max told them someone was trying to break in and if not there was some 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 so created us that we have built within us a variety of 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 alarm systems and there's much we can learn from the way 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 is happening inside.

As Jesus was nearing the end of his public ministry and could see the opposition growing against him, he said at one point, "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 had the experience of suffering and pain--be it mental or physical or both? We know the pain of loss, of grief, of loneliness, of guilt, of illness, of betrayal, of 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. And today in our world when there are so many pain-killing drugs, there is an even stronger temptation to try to avoid any kind of suffering, even minor pain and as I said earlier, to treat it only on the outside with a band-aid approach rather than

on the inside.

In his best selling book some years ago, 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." I remember especially one commercial for a popular pain killer which said, "When you haven't got time for the pain."

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. If we too quickly try to get rid of or avoid the pain before we un-

derstand 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, it is rather 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 the painkillers-- aspirins, barbituates, codeine, tranquilizers, sleeping pills and dozens of

other analgesics or desensitizing drugs or they turn to tobacco or alcohol or some other substance as a way of killing or 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 with 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 rather than wanting to learn something about themselves from the pain only want some medicine that will quickly get rid of it.

We need to learn all we can from pain. Pain is a friend, not an enemy. It's helpful to know whether there is some underlying physical cause, or does the pain come from the abuse of ourselves, or from some mental or spiritual issue which we are reluctant to examine?

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

If for example an athlete does not pay attention to pain, but too quickly turns to a pain-killer, he or she could cause long-term or even permanent damage to the body. If a baseball pitcher did not pay attention to a sore arm, but instead took pain-killers 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 in spite of the pain. Very few if any individuals feel like getting out of bed and walking a few steps following surgery. Those few steps can be very 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 of the pain of grief. When a loved one dies we can use the pain of grief as an excuse for not doing anything for too long a time

and it can keep us from being with people and taking action 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 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 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 interferred with can go a long way to 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 meet 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.

The cultivation of this relationship with God can give us an attitude toward life which in itself is health-giving. It doesn't mean pain and suffering will not come our way, but it does mean that we

will have the power and strength to deal with them and we will be stronger as a result.

On another level, taking time for the pain, paying attention to what our suffering is telling us, can lead us to constructively deal 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 another one of the prophets. "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

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 that they'd 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 which comes when some of your dreams are shattered. The other choice is to have no dreams at all and therefore no pain.

Jesus said, "I tell you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain and there's no potential, 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 other people but then you are taking the risk of a failed relationship which can cause pain and suffering but can also bring joy and happiness.

On still another level in your living, 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, but it is also true of other kinds of pain as well.

When someone you love dies or moves away or is gone from your life for whatever reason, it takes time for healing. If you try to cover up the pain or avoid it or gloss over it, you are not able to come through the pain of grief to the other side.

During my almost 40 years of being in the ministry, I have conducted hundreds and hundreds of funerals and thus I have been with an equal number of families and individuals as they have dealt with the pain of loss and death and the suffering that goes 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 9 years and had 3 children. After the funeral I was alone with the husband in their home and his grief was very deep. He asked over and over again, "Why did this happen?" I didn't have any 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 because you 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 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 my life in spite of the sudden death of Sarah 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 the loving relationship with his wife 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 a respon-

sible person is willing to make that kind of investment because of the joy that is on the other side.

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