

Taking the Drama Out of Trauma

1 Peter 4:12-13

Steve Hollaway
Harbor Church
April 15, 2012

How far is far? In Rhode Island, 20 minutes is far. When you can cross your entire state in 40 minutes, half of that seems like a lot. People say, “You went all the way to Warwick to get that?” In Texas they see things differently. Becca’s Dad called this week and said “Just fly into either DFW or Austin. Either way it’s only 100 miles.” When we visit Waco, a friend in San Antonio says, “You have to come see us; we’re only 3 hours away.” When it takes 16 hours to cross a state, 3 is no big deal. How far is far? It’s relative to what you expect.

How bad is bad? It’s a matter of perspective. If you take your hurt and consider it in a global perspective—if you compare your hurt to all the starvation in Africa, or to human trafficking, or to the violence against women—or if you see your hurt against the backdrop of all the diseases and injuries in the world, it seems pretty small. But if you take your hurt and place it in a little terrarium and sit in on a table and watch it grow, it starts to seem awfully large.

I have been thinking lately about how much drama many of us bring to the trauma we experience in this life. I am naturally bent toward the codependent side, like most pastors, as someone with a need to take care of people rooted in my own mother’s neediness. I’m a born sucker for tales of woe. But even I am often struck by how much needless drama people bring to their own lives when they are going through the normal struggles of life or parenting or aging, or enduring the insulting comments that everybody endures and Christians should be expecting. I speak as one who has not known much physical pain in my life, so I do not wish to be critical of those who find pain unbearable. But most people seem to manage to cope with physical pain; it is the emotional pain they focus on. It is the little slights and injustices that become the plot lines of the great tragedy being acted out on the stage of their lives. We write, for the most part, our own script. We are the lead actor. We are the director.

I wonder sometimes if hurts don’t grow especially well in this little terrarium we call Block Island. There is something about a very small community that makes small hurts seem large. In part it’s because when one person is hurt, that person is only 2 or 3 degrees of separation from everyone else. In part it’s because, as I have been told, the island is an echo chamber. What one person says or even feels gets bounced around so many times that it is amplified. And in part, it’s the perspective thing. When the limits of your concerns are 7 x 3, when the biggest things you worry about are the fertilizer on the ball field, the number of deer, and stupid letters in the paper, other little hurts start to feel big, too.

On several occasions I’ve had people tell me that they couldn’t sleep all night because of an email in which they felt disrespected or because something they read in the paper upset them. It would be unkind to say “Get a life.” But I could say “Get some perspective.” I could say with Isaiah, “Look up at the night sky. Who created these? He brings them out each night like an army and calls them by name. The Lord is the everlasting God. How can you say ‘My way is hidden from the Lord’?”

God is doing big things in the world, reconciling all things to himself, creating a people for himself from every nation. God is bringing his kingdom into reality by means of little people who are his agents and ambassadors. Your life fits into that big plan, what we sometimes call

“the grand scheme of things.” How does your hurt fit into that scheme? And how does your hurt compare to the hurt of Jesus on the cross, the very hurt in the heart of God?

Some would say that I am minimizing your pain. I don’t think so. I know your pain is real, whether physical or emotional. I know it can fill up all the psychic space in your day and take all your energy to deal with. I am not asking you to ignore it or to fail to treat it. I am asking you to back up and get some perspective on that pain in relation to all the good in your life, in relation to the wideness of God’s mercy and the scope of his activity, and in relation to God’s purposes at work in your life.

I’d like you to think about two verses from 1 Peter 4. This epistle comes around in the lectionary during Eastertide because of its references to the resurrection with which we began the service, but most of 1 Peter deals with suffering and persecution. To be honest, the suffering Peter has in mind is the suffering that comes as a result of living like a Christian, but I think his letter can give us perspective on all the kinds of suffering we endure. Listen to verses 12 and 13:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

There are three questions this text asks us as Christians who are going through hard experiences.

1. What did you expect? Peter doesn’t spare us: “Don’t be surprised ... as though something strange were happening to you.” All through the letter he is addressing the fact that Christians are suffering. They are not being protected by God from the hard times. The Christian life isn’t turning out to be easy or smooth. And Peter asks his readers directly, “What did you expect? This is normal. This is the real world. This is the way things are. We are followers of Jesus; look what happened to him.” He could have quoted that old song, “I beg your pardon—I never promised you a rose garden.”

Do you think we’ve oversold Christianity? Or sold it as a narcotic when it should have been offered as a challenge? Who ever told you that God would keep you from suffering? Were there false promises made from this pulpit? We must have created false expectations, or people wouldn’t cry out “Why me?” when suffering comes. Why me? Because you are human, that’s why. Did somebody feed you the silly idea that bad things don’t happen to good people? How can you look at this cross and think that could be true? Did they forget to tell you the story of Jesus?

The gospel of success and prosperity has always been around, because from the beginning of Christianity, there were people who wanted to use it as magic to make a buck. Paul got criticized by his rivals because he wasn’t all buff and tuff. How can he represent God—with that appearance and that voice? How can he be God’s man when he gets sick and all these bad things keep happening to him? Paul says in response that if he is going to boast about anything in his life, he’s going to boast about his suffering, because that is what makes him an appropriate messenger for the message of the cross. Listen to his list: imprisonments, floggings, some to near death; 39 lashes, beatings with rods, stoning; shipwrecks, being adrift at sea, danger from rivers, danger from Jews, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the desert, danger at sea, danger from fake Christians; sleepless nights, hungry and thirsty, without food, cold, naked. That is what he offers as proof that he is a servant of Christ. What did you expect when you signed up?

2. What do you have in common with Jesus? Peter assumes, as Paul does, that if we are followers of Jesus we are going to share in the same kind of suffering Jesus experienced. This is normal and not strange. If the master, so the student. Paul says that we are sharing Jesus' sufferings (e.g. Romans 8:17). In chapter 2 of this epistle, Peter gives instructions to slaves who are being beaten. His logic seems foreign to us. He tells the Christian slaves, "To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps." Christ showed us *how to suffer*. Peter expands this to include all Christians : we should endure suffering at the hands of others with nonviolence and no thought of revenge. How many of us got the impression that Jesus suffered on the cross so we wouldn't have to? Peter never got that memo. He died on a cross himself.

This is the kind of thinking most of us Protestants associate with Catholic spirituality. We think of ourselves as the winners in the world, who focus on Christ's victory in the resurrection, while the Catholics are the losers who meditate on Jesus still hanging on the cross and identify with him. But when we face suffering, identifying with Jesus is just what we need to do. We need to look at our suffering—especially when we suffer because we live as Christians, but I think it applies to any kind of suffering—as sharing the experience of Jesus. The *way* we deal with it shows whether we are following Jesus' example or not. I am not talking about *seeking* suffering as a masochist, but understanding your own suffering when it comes as a new connection to Jesus.

3. How is this test purifying your faith? Peter calls the suffering the church is experiencing "a fiery ordeal." It's the same image he used in the first chapter when he said that various trials test the genuineness of our faith as gold that is tested and purified by fire. It is the assumption of the New Testament writers that the suffering that Christians endure are shaping them, purifying them, and bringing them to maturity. The author of Hebrews says that even Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered" (5:8). There are some things we can only learn by suffering.

A rabbi was asked by a pupil why Deuteronomy (6:6) says that "these words ... shall be upon thy heart." "Why is it said that way?" the pupil asked. "Why are we not told to place them *in* our heart?" The rabbi answered that it is not within our power to place God's teachings *in* our hearts. "All we can do is place them on the surface of the heart so that when the heart breaks they will drop in."

Paul says in Romans (5:3-4) that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. James (1:2-4) says that we should count it joy when we encounter trials, because testing produces endurance, and endurance produces maturity. British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, who became a Christian late in life, said, "Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, everything I have learned, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness."

Paul famously wrote in 2 Corinthians 12 about his "thorn in the flesh," something painful that God would not take away. No matter how many times he prayed, he still had that hurt. Finally Jesus said to him, "My grace is enough for you. My strength is made perfect in your weakness." That is what only hurt can teach us: that Jesus is enough. The French poet Paul Claudel wrote:

Christ did not come to do away with suffering;
He did not come to explain it;

He came to fill it with his presence.

Another French writer, Simone Weil (pronounced Vay), said, “The tremendous greatness of Christianity comes from the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy against suffering, but a supernatural use of suffering.”

We learn only through our hurts to experience the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and learn that it is enough for us. We meet him in the experience of suffering and learn to trust him to be faithful. In the words of the hymn,

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be with thee thy trouble to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.
When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not harm thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.

A few verses after our text for the morning (4:19), the apostle Peter gives us a summary of his instructions to the believers: “Therefore let those suffering in accordance with God’s will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.” May the faithful God help us so to live.