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Spiritual Pain/Spiritual Healing

Part 1: A Meaningful Life

Matthew 3.13-17

Let me ask you to ask yourself a courageous question..."How am I within?"

This is a question Dame Cicely Saunders, founder of the Hospice movement, suggested is a vital question to take your spiritual pulse.

How are you within? What's going on deep inside of you? On a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being extreme anxiety and fear and 5 being completely peaceful, where would you rank yourself today?

What prevents you from experiencing the peace and Grace of God's presence in the present moment?

There's a phrase that says Pain in life...not just physical pain but emotional and spiritual pain as well...is inevitable...suffering is often optional and misery is usually a choice. And we usually experience suffering and misery because we run away from and are unwilling to face the inevitable pain of life.

Here's the paradox: it is our places of brokenness that provide the greatest opportunities for transformation. It is through the broken places that the light can enter. The Celts use the phrase, "lean into your pain". If we can lean into our pain, rather than run away from it, there is another side but the only way to the other side is through.

I think of my most recent weight loss...apart from diet and exercise...one of the keys was being willing to ask myself, "How am I within? What's going on deep inside?"

And there was a lot of unresolved grief I was avoiding. I am a chronic stress eater and have been for a long time. I use food to numb my pain and anxiety and fear and stress. So instead of asking, "What's going on deep inside?" I would eat as a coping mechanism.

I know I wouldn't have been successful in losing this weight if I wasn't willing to lean into my pain and pay attention to where my soul was crying out and what my soul needed. I am definitely still on this path of transformation and it's not a straight line and it is not easy but I know there is another side and the only way to get there is through.

Our culture teaches us to avoid our pain...to numb it...to run away . . . to distract ourselves. Father Richard Rohr said, "Pain that is not transformed is transmitted." We need to be willing to ask ourselves that courageous question: How am I within? What's going on deep inside? And be willing to lean into rather than avoid our pain. We need to continue to build the kind of community where we will walk alongside one another . . . not fixing . . . not converting . . . but listening, loving, "being there." So, for the next few weeks I want to journey with you through a message series I'm calling Spiritual Pain...Spiritual Healing!

In his book *American Book of Living and Dying*, Richard Groves points out the ancient wisdom that says regardless of time, place or culture, there are 4 universal spiritual pains that are common to the human condition and have to do with 4 key existential issues:

- Meaning
- Forgiveness
- Relatedness
- Hopelessness

I want to address each of these four spiritual pains the next few weeks...take our spiritual pulse...lean into them...seek the path of transformation we are invited to travel.

The first universal spiritual pain I want us to lean into is the pain that results a crisis of meaning and identity. Some suggest there is ultimately only one great spiritual question: Who am I and who am I in relationship to God?

It is often times of crisis, transition, brokenness, dark nights of the soul...an illness, economic crisis, death of a loved one, end of a relationship, job loss, uncertainty ... that break us loose from our moorings adrift wondering who are we...and what is my life all about?

Theologian Howard Clinebell suggests the sickness of our day is not that we think too highly of ourselves but that we don't think highly enough. What looks on the surface as an obsession with self in our culture is really a mask trying to disguise the insecurity, fear and crisis of identity and spiritual pain deep within. We're a culture adrift without moorings seeking to confirm our sense of identity in all the wrong places.

Howard Thurman was a distinguished professor at Boston University, the first African American to hold a faculty post there. Some one asked him, "How did you survive all the hostility and cruelty and hate and discrimination you experienced as a child...being treated as inferior, second rate, less than human? He

said, “ My Mama kept telling me I was a child of God and I believed her and there was nothing that could happen or that any one could say or do that would change that and I believed her. So, even when the whole world seemed to be against me, I naively trusted and had the audacity to believe that God was FOR me. So I had nothing to fear”

There’s the ultimate spiritual question . . . especially when face to face with life’s pain and unfairness, deep down, do we believe that God is FOR us? Deep down, do we believe that God is FOR us?

That’s what this baptism font is here to reminds you...God is FOR you! There is a Grace that confers on you value, worth, dignity that is stronger and deeper than anything the world can confer or deny.

Susan Andrews, former Moderator of the PCUSA, once said that God doesn’t sprinkle us with grace...God drenches us with Grace...ah...to be drenched with grace..something every soul longs for whether they realize it or not.

When he was about 30 years old, Jesus of Nazareth was baptized. We know virtually nothing about Jesus from infancy until he is 30, other than one isolated incident when he was 12 and his parents took him to Jerusalem for the Passover.

His story, the story of his ministry, actually begins on the day he walks out of Nazareth, away from his father’s carpenter’s shop, a few miles out into the countryside, to hear a preacher by the name of John, who is actually a distant relative.

John's preaching is fiery and compelling, like the legendary prophets, Amos & Micah.

His message is strong: repent, turn around, devote yourself wholly to God, begin a new life, walk into the river and be baptized, let the waters wash the old away, emerge a new person.

I love to ponder the literary history of stories like this. How did it get into the New Testament? There were no disciples yet to see it and remember it. The only other witness we know was there was John the Baptist himself, and John will be imprisoned and killed by King Herod in the very near future.

So I like to imagine that it's in there for us to read today because it was a defining moment...a transformative moment for Jesus and he told his disciples about it and the story was passed along until Mark, Matthew and Luke wrote it down.

This was the day Jesus changed...the day he decided to live more intentionally and passionately for God...the day his identity was confirmed...the day he knew himself to be God's child, God's beloved and that changed everything! . . . everything to come would flow from this.

I think of when Jesus washed the disciples feet showing us what love looks like. A few verses before this story he says, "I know who I am. I know where I have come from and where I am going." It was from this sense of identity and worthiness that he was able to love unconditionally without expecting anything in return. In my imagination, I can see Jesus sitting at a meal with his disciples breaking bread...sharing some wine...one of his disciples asks, "How did it all begin? Where did this journey start?"

I can imagine Jesus saying something like, “So, there I was standing in the crowd, listening to John, like everyone else, and all of a sudden my whole life passed in front of my eyes, all 30 years of it, I was filled with a sense of anxiety and anticipation...I knew I was at a turning point... that I was called to something greater than myself, that I had to decide now what to do with the rest of my life...so I found myself walking into that river and asking John to baptize me, and he did...pushed me under the water and pulled me back up, and as I stood there a little embarrassed, feeling foolish, soaking wet, water running down my face, tears suddenly came, it was as if the sky opened up and I was filled with God’s presence, and I heard this voice deep inside addressing me, “You are my child...my beloved...marked by my love...with you I am well pleased.”

This was the day Jesus knew who he was and whose he was and what his life was all about...the day he was freed to love with abandon and that he had nothing to fear – not even death itself – because he knew that love would never let him go.

And from that moment on, his ministry emerged out of that sense of identity...out of that experience of being loved unconditionally. Those who came near him experienced the healing power of that love. Those in deep spiritual pain . . . the outcasts, the rejected, the hurting . . . were drawn to that love, people received a new identity and a sense of their own worth, dignity and value.

John Buchanan tells the story about John Galloway who is a Presbyterian pastor, whose wife Susan died from ALS, Lou Gehrig’s disease. John said near the end her body deteriorated slowly and painfully but not her spirit.

Near the end, when she was paralyzed completely, unable to speak, communicating by typing with one finger on her computer, all her friends and family decided to throw Susan a party. They ate and drank and told stories and laughed and cried and each person said what they wanted to say to Susan and about Susan.

At the end of the evening, before her guests left, she typed on her computer screen so they all could read: 'I am not afraid. This has been the best year of my life...to know how much you are loved.' You could say, perhaps, for Susan, it was like a dove descended on her and she heard a voice deep inside... "You are my child...my beloved...marked by my love...the delight of my heart."

This is at the heart of the Christian faith, at some point, in some way as we lean into the pain of our own journeys, we all need to hear those blessed words, "You are my child...my beloved...marked by my love...with you I am well pleased."

Paul Tillich expresses this beautifully in my favorite sermon of all time: "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when year after year the longed for perfection doesn't appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, When despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, 'You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you do not know.

Do not ask the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.”

God doesn't sprinkle us with Grace. God drenches us with Grace!

We are loved unconditionally and eternally and no one and nothing can ever take that away from us. And it is the assurance of that love that frees us to live and love with purpose and passion having nothing to fear...not even death itself!

The ushers are going to hand you bowls of water I invite you to pass along to one another. As you receive a bowl, dip your fingers in the water to remind you of your baptism and, even if you have never been baptized, it is for you...for every one...

As we dip our fingers may we hear that voice deep inside that reminds us who we are and whose we are... “You are a child of God...beloved...marked by my love...the delight of my heart.”

(with thanks to Richard Groves and John Buchanan for inspiring t his message.)