

A true story, that starts off like a Bad Joke: The Jewish Rabbi, A Catholic Priest, the Muslim Imam and a Presbyterian Pastor, were invited by the Chaplains of University Hospital to speak to the entering Class of Medical Residents about Human Suffering in the Healing Process. The Priest and Rabbi started off by stating there was no connection between Faith and Medicine. Next the Imam claimed Suffering is a good thing, because Suffering forces the individual to reconsider their sins; like the alcoholic finally reaching bottom and facing the costs of their addiction. Finding a rare point in common the Priest & Rabbi agreed with the Imam! At which, the Pastor heard several of the Medical Students murmuring: "I'm not allowing these guys to see patients, if they are going to inflict greater suffering!" At which the Pastor spoke publicly to the Priest, asking "if the point of the Crucifixion had not been Christ's own sacrifice and acceptance of suffering for all humanity, that not even death could separate us from God's love?" Then to the Rabbi, inquiring about the Book of Job, that while the 3 friends all tried to connect Job's suffering to his past actions, God eventually stated that punishment for past sins had not been the cause of Job's suffering! Having come this far, I brought up the point of this morning's readings...

Job's sufferings had not been punishment, as his life had been blameless, without sin; the point of the Prodigal Son going hungry and feeding pigs, were not punishment & suffering, so much as the result of wasting his life. But, in both of these stories, how do we seek balance when the whole world is out of sorts? We have a need for closure, for resolution. There is brokenness between The Prodigal and his Father, between Job and all the forces of this world... but in all of our relationships there has also been harm to God! How do we seek balance and resolution with God for our circumstances? That SEARCH FOR BALANCE WITH GOD IN THE WORLD IS WHAT IN THE CHURCH WE CALL DOXOLOGY! Job's best friends have accused Job of having sinned, having abandoned their faith in God, they even blamed God for being distant and removed. Job's Wife had told him to abandon faith in God, to curse God and die! How does one carry on after that? Likewise the Prodigal Son had said to his father, I wish you were dead so I could have my inheritance! In the words of Yoda from Star Wars: "A Disturbance in the Force there is!" If this were the Movies, we expect opposing sides to try to kill one another, to so dominate as to win, but in real life, in faith there has to be a different means of winning, of seeking balance.

Repeatedly, we have said when dealing with a situation of Conflict, you cannot match the person one for one, or attempt to dominate, because like standing up to a bully, like trying to outdraw a killer in the old west this only leads to a gunfight. Any attempt to play into conflict just escalates the conflict. The only solution is to not play, not compete, or dominate. Instead like the father in the Parable of the two sons, when the younger wants his share, simply to give it to him. Like God when the wife and three friends try to teach Job, not to challenge or correct them. Anything you do at the time, is only going to add kerosene to the fire.

The 1<sup>st</sup> difficulty in seeking to find balance is the difficulty of Jesus at the Cross: accept not being able to win, Jesus suffered and died. Given passages throughout the Gospels, of the Clouds parting and a Voice coming from heaven, or of Jesus being the next Elijah, we fully expect God to send a flaming Chariot to save Jesus from the Cross, but instead the goalposts were moved from: whether Jesus lives or dies, to the meaning of Jesus' death for us, the hope of life after death, where God is God.

The Second difficulty in finding balance is you cannot make the other atone for wrongs said or done to you. Please hear me when I state, I am not suggesting staying in abusive relationships! But that in order to move on, there needs to come an acknowledgement, a point of recognition that: nursing the wounds of a broken relationship is less important than having a brother or sister in your life. Stated differently, recognizing that we repeat learned behavior generation after generation, we only know to Cut-Off

relationships. Until we can name and own the hurt, we remain wounded, but the wounded ones cannot be those to name the cut-off without beginning the conflict again.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is complete and powerful unto itself... We can and are need to feel shock and outrage when a Child says to their parent "I wish you were dead" when there is a brokenness. We can recognize the parent attempting to shield their child from public scorn and ridicule by running through the streets to embrace the return of their child. But what the story does not name for us, are the feelings of the parent, hoping and waiting for years, for the other to choose differently. Not long ago, I watched the funeral of a friend on Line, and what amazed me was that his son provided the eulogy. If not the Pastor, often a loved one or friend speaks for the memory of their life, except that forty years ago the son had been arrested for drugs and had been distant from the family. Nothing was said of how for forty years, every time the phone rang that father had hoped and feared it was his son, for forty years every holiday there was an empty chair at the table, for forty years all the father wanted was to run to embrace his son, who now after the father died had come home.

However, what can be done is a sacrificial act. By being sacrificial, you cannot claim anything that even appears like winning, as you name moving on. This is the Offering of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar bringing to Job, for Job to offer to restore their relationship with God. This is the Party of the Prodigal Son, for this my Son was dead and is alive once more. Last week, Pastor Diane made reference to Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. I thank God we can beg for forgiveness at any time, because Orthodox Judaism required you had to find a means to receive forgiveness before the next day (Yom YHWH = The Day of the LORD) or else you had to suffer with that brokenness for another year.

In the 1960s there was an extremely infuriating French philosopher at Stanford University, named Jacques Derrida, who loved to play with language. His most basic argument followed on Rene Descartes' "I Think Therefore I AM" treatise by Derrida describing that "When there is a difference between differing opinions, there needs to be a deference, of lowering our guard, and that deference is what makes all the difference to those who differ."

Later this month our Valley Readers' Book Study is discussing a John Grisham Novel about a South Sudanese. Twenty years ago we sponsored several of the Lost Boys, and after 5 years, I had opportunity to go to Africa on behalf of The Lost Boys of South Sudan. The media named them "Lost boys" because these children who started out at less than 10 years of age, had spent 20 years in refugee camps without any adult leadership and like Peter Pan were now 25-30 year old children. "Boys" because so many of the girls had been raped and killed. "Lost" because these 6,000,000 children had fled home and villages in war, walking across the open Sahara crossing the Blue Nile to Ethiopia, scavenging for food and water in the desert. But Ethiopia then also went into Civil War, and the children were taken back at gunpoint to the river, where after crossing, walked south from Ethiopia to Kenya. Traveling solo as a Pastor, using letters and photos from refugees sent over the internet, I was able to re-unite over 100 "Lost Families."

One of the refugees, I had sponsored, turned out to be the son of the Chief of the Dinka Tribe the largest population in South Sudan. The Chief publicly disclosed a family embarrassment, that as a young man he had fallen in love, and they had conceived a child before the Dowry was paid meaning before legitimate! The woman's brother visited one night, outraged that they were not married, and demanded he name the child: John Doe. Now 30 years later, the Chief affirmed that in these years separated from their son, the dowry had been paid, so he was now charging that as Pastor I was to go to America, to host a feast where John Doe would be renamed Dhieu Deng Leek Mageer: Dhieu meaning the child had been born

during the War; Deng meaning the rainy season; Leek was their family name and that as a young child he had loved playing with and climbing upon an enormous white Bull with long Horns which is called "Mageer". If your family dinners have gone as ours regularly do, as this naming feast did, the real meat of the meal is not in the food that is eaten, but in the opportunity to sit together, to tell stories, to rekindle and redraw lines of relationship. But seeking balance, need not be a meal.

This week The Rice's who are our Presbyterian missionaries in South Sudan, named that for \$500 we could start a church in South Sudan. If these are what I have seen, dirt mounds would be created as Pews. Food has been delivered from the World Food Bank in Woven White plastic sacks like burlap bags. These empty sacks would then be filled with mud and cement, to form walls like an igloo. The white mud-brick walls would keep out the heat, with a thatch roof for shelter. Instead of stained glass windows, or expansive windows like our own, their windows are quite small, to block the heat and the wind and rain, but let in the light of Jesus Christ.

In this time in our lives, when there has been so much division, political bickering, fear, what if we were to fund the churches of the Pastors being trained by our Presbyterian missionaries at The Nile Theological School? Is creating a church worth \$500?