

LEAN INTO PAIN

JOB 30:16-24

JUNE 8, 1986

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Please remain standing. We have just sung the hymn about sorrow, anguish and wounded hearts. Will all of you who have ever suffered from a wounded heart, anguish, or sorrow, please sit down. Now, from among those who are still standing, will all of you who have ever experienced emotional pain, pain in your body or in your head, please sit down!

I suspect this sermon is relevant! We all know about pain. In our Scripture lesson this morning, Job says it well. Job experienced pain like few of us have. He lost all his herds, servants, crops and children. He also had terrible sores appear all over his body. Job lamented, (30:17-19), "The pain that gnaws me takes no rest. With violence it seizes my garment; it binds me about like the collar of my tunic. God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes." Job also felt that his prayers were not answered. Have you experienced the pain of not being heard? Job complained in anguish, (30:20), "I cry to thee and thou dost not answer me!"

Few of us have lost our possessions, business and family, like Job, but in our culture today we have a new phenomenon called stress. I'm sure there has always been stress, but we have a new name for it, and its victims are increasing. Books and multitudes of articles have been written, talk shows interview "experts," medicine is prescribed. Stress and pain are with us. I'm told that a recent study by a psychologist and biochemist discovered that stress in marriage affects the woman more than the man, while job stress has more impact on a man than on a woman. In a stressful marriage, the immune system of the woman is lowered. She becomes vulnerable to illness, fatigue, and breakdown. Even our youth are experiencing extreme stress and pain. Our youth are committing suicide at an alarming rate. Suicide is the number two killer among youth. The number one killer is automobile accidents, and who knows how many accidents are in fact suicides.

Pain is everywhere, in all of us, in our families. Scratch beneath the surface of most everyone here this morning and you will find some kind of pain. Pain is a part of life; yet, few of us know how to handle pain effectively and productively. We live in a culture which seems to assume that pain is unusual and deniable. We seem to think if we can cover up or deny the pain, it will go away, and we can pretend it never existed. But, the methods of denial and cover-up do not work! As Matthew Fox writes in Original Blessing (pg. 141), "Covering our pain with drugs, alcohol, soap operas, or shopping is no release from the pain. It is more acquiescence, of a perverse kind, to the pain. It is letting pain run our lives." We pray for God to relieve or take away the pain, but often, as Job experienced, God does not seem to answer. What are we doing wrong?

Rather than running from the pain or denying the pain, lean into the pain. Leaning into pain includes three steps: First, name the pain, identify it. Job did a masterful job describing his pain, discussing it, and naming it. Jesus named the demons, which gave him power over the demons. Name the demon of pain. Identify the pain, isolate it, describe it, lean into it. The only way a dentist heals a toothache is to enter the pain; identify the cavity, the infection, go to the root of the problem and clean it out. A toothache can be covered up and disguised by the use of pain killers, but long-term relief comes when the inflamed cavity is identified and treated.

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Some find relief in using the same technique with headaches. Rather than covering or disguising the headache with a pain killer, try naming the pain. Identify the part of the head that is aching. Isolate the pain. Describe it. What color is the pain? How large an area is the pain? What is the root of the pain? Seek to understand the pain for usually a headache is trying to tell us something about the way we are treating our bodies. There is often a message in the pain. Likewise with emotional pain, heartache, anguish. Name the pain, isolate it, identify it, discover the root of the pain. In other words, let the pain be pain. Allow the pain to be pain. Don't deny it, disguise it or seek to cover it up. Lean into pain by naming it.

The second step: embrace the pain. This is difficult, and at first hearing, seems ridiculous. Why would anyone want to embrace pain? But, Jesus taught us to love our enemies, and pain is an enemy. It requires courage to love your enemy, embrace your pain, and let the pain be pain. We may not like to admit it, but pain is often beneficial. Pain often forces us to cut through the superficialities of life. Pain often forces us to go deeper into our inner lives.

Pain often burns within us, cleaning out the impurities. In my childhood in Minnesota when homes burned coal or wood, chimney fires were a common occurrence. When the chimney got clogged with carbon, a fire would often start. There was danger to the roof of the house when flames would soar out the chimney, but the chimney would breathe easier after the fire cleaned out the junk. There is a lot of junk in many of us. Our inner lives are often cluttered with materialism, self-pity, unresolved anger, bitterness, and devotion to things that will not endure. When we embrace pain, we have the opportunity to face ourselves, look at what we are doing with our lives, get some priorities straightened out, realize what is really important, and open ourselves to a relationship with God. Many people, because of pain, have found God, have experienced the healing, loving presence and power of the Holy Spirit. As Matthew Fox writes, "Let pain sensitize you to what is truly beautiful in life."

Fox also gives us a powerful image of how to embrace pain, quoting the Japanese poet Kenji Miyazawa. Pick up your pain like you pick up sticks of firewood for the fireplace. Embrace the pieces as you embrace an armload of firewood. Each piece fits neatly into your arms, or not so neatly. If you are like me, you drop a few sticks! I often awaken in the middle of the night. My mind races with thoughts of all I forgot to do the previous day and all that I must do the next day. Sometimes I experience pain and anxiety over problems and relationships not yet worked through. I try to gather them all into my arms, like a stack of firewood, but then I drop a few on the way to the fire. I think I have everything neatly arranged and then, wham, I think of something else; another stick of pain that needs to be identified, picked up, and embraced in my arms. The second step in leaning into pain is to embrace the pain as you embrace a bundle of firewood.

But, don't keep the bundle in your arms. Throw it into the fire. This is the third step. Throw the pieces of pain into the fire. Give the pain to God. "Cast your burden on the Lord," Psalm 55:22. Cast your pain into the fire where the Holy Spirit can consume it. The purpose of naming the pain and embracing the pain is to let the pain go. Release it to God. Matthew Fox writes (pg. 147), "I must emphasize how important it is that we not glorify

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pain or cling to our pain or wallow in our pain. That is not letting pain be pain--that is letting pain be our boss...The purpose of letting pain be pain is precisely this: to let go of pain."

It is tempting to feel sorry for ourselves when we have pain. It is tempting to use our pain to manipulate other people to feel sorry for us, or to wait on us. Pain is often a very effective means of controlling those around us. Instead of wallowing in the pain, or manipulating others with the pain, let it go. Give the pain to God. Gather up the sticks of pain into not-so-neat bundles, and throw them into the fire!

In other words, praise and thank God for the pain. Isn't that revolutionary! Paul admonished us to "give thanks to God in all circumstances," and "all circumstances" includes pain! Have you come to the place in your relationship with God where you can actually praise God even for pain?

Praise God for the pain which makes you a stronger person.

Praise God for the pain which opens you up, cleans out the junk, cuts through the self-concern and self-centeredness, and makes room for the Holy Spirit.

Praise God for the pain which opens you to other people. Mechthild of Magdeburg, centuries ago, wrote, "When I can no longer bear my loneliness, I take it to my friends. For I must share it with all the friends of God." "Do you suffer?" she asked, and replied, "So do I."

Praise God for the pain which sensitizes you to the pain of others and makes you more compassionate. All social advances were born of pain. The sharing of the pain of others unites us in causes where we attack the evils of racism, poverty, sexism, hunger and nuclear war.

Praise God for pain. Pain is not to be covered up, disguised, or wallowed in. Name your pain. Identify it. Embrace the pain. Gather it up in your arms like firewood and give it to God. I cannot emphasize that strongly enough. Give your pain to God, and leave it there. I find that often I give my bundle of burdens to God, but then pull back a stick or two. I give it to God but I want to hang on as well. Give it to God! In faith, believe that God takes the pain, and then, leave it there. Sometimes a song helps us to understand and to act. Let me sing the third step in leaning into pain, a gospel song, "Leave It There."

Chorus:

Leave it there, leave it there.

Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

If you trust and never doubt, God will surely bring you out;

Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

If your body suffers pain and your health you can't regain,  
And your soul is almost sinking in despair,

Jesus knows the pain you feel, He can save and He can heal;

Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

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When your enemies assail and your heart begins to fail,  
Don't forget that God in heaven answers prayer;  
God will make a way for you and will lead you safely through;  
Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

When your youthful days are gone and old age is stealing on,  
And your body bends beneath the weight of care;  
God will never leave you then, He'll go with you to the end;  
Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.