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Mark 9.2-9

“WHAT CAN WE DO WITH OUR PAIN?”

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An old saying echoes in my line of work. Folks seldom call the church when the big promotion comes; when your child makes National Merit Scholar; or when the generous bid on your house lets you get a shiny new house. People call at midnight as your house burns down; as the neighbor girl dies from an overdose; as you lose your job and fear paralyzes you. I have had all these calls several times.

No, that isn't *always* true. For I also get called to do beautiful, touching baptisms. But it is *mostly* true. I claim this not as a complaint, to the contrary. For when you are flush with success, God is mostly a distant rumor and his voice seems dim. When times are good it is tempting just to skate along upon the surface of things. When pain brings you to your knees, you cry out, you *crave* God. God speaks vividly here in prayers, hymns and sermons in ways you never detected before. As we enter your hurting space, we're honored to stand with you on holy ground. Our ministry takes on meaning. We get to be present in ways you'll never forget.

Trying to bring comfort, my first response is to come alongside you gently without any sudden or sharp movements; to listen, hear, and reflect back to you the unimaginable you must repeat over and over again out loud to believe it is real; to resist my natural human urge to want to fix everything to make it all ok again. (If only it were that simple!); and to walk alongside you in the loneliest time of your life. I always want to act more directly, but bringing God's loving care is more indirect. I must enter your helplessness and powerlessness, take it on myself, no easy fix.

As we must face tough things the urge to deny, to skip its real unpleasantness, is always keen for all of us. Having planned my little brother's memorial and slotted myself as a eulogist, I didn't want to go. I had to emotionally drag myself there. That is the moment when a powerful little phrase I have burnished for decades comes into play. I share it with others in their deepest pain and repeat it to myself

“There is no way around it. The only way is through it.” What I mean by that is we all naturally cower emotionally in seasons of extreme pain and loss. We will do just about anything to escape fully experiencing the most devastating heartache we could ever know within a lifetime. We engineer patterns of behavior to buffer ourselves against what we imagine is too much for any human being to withstand

For example, we bury ourselves in overwork, huffing and puffing breathlessly in productivity, to make sure we're not left alone with ourselves and life's new reality to reflect upon it and process it. Or we take up a cheerful power of positive thinking imagining we can magically will ourselves to a better place by focusing less on the bad and focusing more on the good. Friends will support both maneuvers because they are just as afraid of it as we are and ill-equipped in dealing with it. If we can move on without facing into the dark, perhaps they can get off it as well.

But here's the thing. I've observed in myself and in others how if we don't face into the darkness that eventually visits us all, if we try to skip it in favor of grief light, we will spend the rest of our days having to return to it in ways that will haunt our lives, never having properly coped with it. If we refuse to gamely face into despair stalking all of us at some point in the course of our lifetime, and instead attempt to circumvent it, our grief comes out sideways toward others, especially those we love, and those we deem safe, to blame and criticize for having badly "failed us." Most important, *if we deaden ourselves to pain in our hard loss, guess what, we'll also deaden ourselves to joy, and inoculate ourselves against coming fully alive.*

"*There is no way around it. The only way is through it,*" is a motto of healthy grief. So imagine my surprise when weeks ago at our Bible Study on Acts I learned the refusal to do this has a name. Jim Conley sent me the article [The Only Way Out Is Through: the Peril of Spiritual Bypass](#) from the journal *Counseling and Values*. Spiritual Bypass is our attempt to avoid genuine contact with our psychological "unfinished business." But the way the article tilts this is what interests me most. It's called *spiritual* bypass because it describes people of faith using beliefs, practices and experiences to insulate ourselves against the hard work of real coping. So it names faith as a culpable perpetrator in rationalizing away life's deep pain. I know it occurs in churches, because I've seen it. But the issue is bigger than that.

Before seminary, I majored in psychology. I took the GRE in psychology and did well. I read Freud and Jung, Skinner and Piaget, Ericson and Gottman, at length. Nowhere in those thinkers did I ever see a text as bold and brave as this lesson demanding we face into our pain, into the world's pain, and even into God's pain.

"Then Jesus began to teach that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take their cross and follow me. For those who save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'

Jesus promises his followers a cross rather than a feather-bed. It is a clarion call to the whole truth of being human, not just glory and triumph, but also pain and death. Peter tries to pretty that up--"Why, we would *never* allow that, Lord!" Jesus rebukes him in the strongest terms, "Get behind me, Satan." Why so emphatic? Because God's way is not hiding or escaping from our pain, but leaning straight into it so God can transform it. We want God to protect us from pain, but instead God promises to transform it into good, like Good Friday into Easter. God offers us a genius we lack for bringing good out of evil, light out of darkness. It's hard to say this directly to people for them to embrace it and to take hold of it. If we were

at Parkland, FL, we would do our best to take their pain on ourselves. And if they asked us why, we would tell them, pointing to the God most known in our aching.

Maybe those who “save their lives only to end up losing them” are those who refuse to face bravely into loss, heartache and pain. And those who “lose their lives only to end up saving them” are those refusing to flinch and run away from hurt, and stare their despair back right in the face. It is a counterintuitive thing to do.

So I don't think faith owns the franchise on bypassing ache and struggle we are meant to stand and face. Not if our faith is biblical. Not if our faith follows Jesus. And not if our faith is in the shape of Christ's cross rather than some smiley face.

But as pastors and churches go sentimental, all bets are off. And we face a lot of pressure from all sides to become sentimental in order to be successful, because the masses clamor after it rather than a cross. What do I mean by sentimentality? Robert Schuller reduced Jesus' Beatitudes, which charged us to identify with the broken and hurting, to what he called Be-Happy Attitudes. That is sentimentality. When Joel Osteen deletes the cross and inserts Prosperity, that is sentimentality.

Liberal churches are sentimental as they deny the doctrine of sin, that we're basically selfish creatures seeking for ourselves in everything, even in seeking God. H. Richard Niebuhr once spoofed us, “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” Conservative churches are sentimental by reducing Jesus to a lap dog, saving them like a shiatzu licking their hand, but damning everyone unlike them.

Kierkegaard said sentimentality is like smoked salmon. Have a bit now and then, it is lovely. Make it a main staple of your daily diet and it will make you very sick, very fast. Sentimentality is when you lose a child and someone thinks it's helpful to say, “Oh, thank God, you're young enough to have another.” Sentimentality is when a woman tried to comfort William Sloane Coffin about losing his son into Boston harbor, saying, “God must have needed him more in heaven than here.”

But sentimentality isn't just in the church. Go to CVS and see the Hallmark cards. For the grieving, you see flowery script with ba-da, ba-da, ba-da, ba-da poetry in sing-song fashion suggesting that it will all work out, just because. Who says so? Give me a straight card from the goofy section at CVS, saying, “Life really sucks at times.” Optimism is basically sentimentality. Hope? That's very real. And it isn't something we can give ourselves. It is God's gift to us. And it comes with a cross.

One of the best preachers of our era, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes, “Not to accept suffering as a normal, inevitable part of being alive seems like a big mistake, and finding ways to cover it up seems like choosing anesthesia. There is a sense in which if I will trust that what comes to me is for me (now that's the hugest faith statement I can make to you), if I will trust that what comes to me in my life is for me and not against me...what I find is that it breaks my idols, that it breaks my

isolation, that it challenges my sense of independence, it does all kinds of things for me that I wouldn't willingly do, that are for me, that are for my spiritual health."

By letting me preach this sermon, and not saying, "Golly, Dale, that wasn't very upbeat. Can't we just accentuate the positive somehow?" you strike a blow at sentimentality." By hearing this message and implicitly trusting that Christ's cross is of God's purpose, you strike a blow at sentimentality. What's more, you give God room to work his costly healing within your life and the earth, instead of the cheap healing of softer, worldlier promises. All I can say to that is amen. Amen.