

Opening Minds, Again

Dr Paul Brand was an orthopedist, a doctor who specialized in treating people's bones.

He dedicated his life to treating folks with leprosy, Hansen's disease, both in India and in Carville, Louisiana.

I don't know if he ever visited Kalaupapa, but his daughter did move to Hawaii at some point.

Dr Brand wrote a book with the off-putting title of: "The Gift of Pain."

Now for most of us, that's a book we would pass right on by.

Pain is no gift!

It's something to be avoided at all costs!

Just count the aspirin bottles and scores of other "pain relievers" in my medicine chest!

But what Dr Brand discovered about leprosy, and what he later discovered about all of us, is that the absence of pain is really where the problems lie.

Hansen's disease patients, for the longest time, were thought to have "bad skin."

That explained the deformed noses, the shortened fingers and toes.

But what Dr Brand learned is that it wasn't "bad skin," but rather the loss of sensation to pain, that caused these problems.

If you can't feel the pain of a blister, you'll keep using that hand to pound nails, until the blister becomes an ulcer and the ulcer becomes badly infected.

If you can't feel that piece of glass you stepped on, you keep walking normally, as the glass penetrates ever deeper into the body.

And if you can't feel your fingers or toes, a rat who nibbles on them while you sleep can cause you to lose them really fast.

We need pain, not only to prevent more pain, but also to finally become who we are meant to be.

And the reality of pain's necessity is driven home in today's gospel lesson.

There's Jesus, standing in front of his friends.

And what does he show them — but his wounds?

Wounds that aren't washed away in his resurrection, but wounds that remain.

Which perhaps tells us something important about our own wounds, whether they be physical, emotional or spiritual.

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor says:

"Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers.

It is not that popular an idea, even among Christians.

We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we've got.

What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices or end human pain.

It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces, to make something holy out of them – not from a distance, but right up close." Modified.

And I wonder if, when Jesus "opens their minds" to understand the Scriptures, if it isn't this very truth that he is sharing with them?

Taking them back to the beginning, he reminds them how God forms a people out of those who once suffered as slaves in Egypt, by making them endure a long time, 40 years, in the desert.

In their suffering, they slowly learn to trust the nearness and kindness of God.

They learn to form a society that welcomes the immigrant.

That cares for the widow and the orphan; for the least, the lost and the left behind.

They learn to create a society so radical that every 50 years, all debt is forgiven.

Lands returned to the original owners.

So that every other generation is given the great gift of a new beginning.

Where wealth is not concentrated in the hands of the few, but redistributed into the hands of the many.

Maybe we are in a similar desert today.

As the incidents of police misconduct toward people of color at long last gets the public attention it deserves.

As school shootings and mall shootings and church shootings escalate, providing people of good will with the urgency to end ready access to weapons of war.

As my white brothers and sisters finally begin to lift the facade that "all is well" — and begin to account for our own ingrained racism.

Might these days, as we witness the suffering of so many, finally bring us to the day when all people see each other AS people!

Where character, and not color, becomes our defining attribute.

Where fear of not having enough and the greed it gives birth to, is replaced with an economy that distributes common goods according to individual needs.

We will not reach any of these peaceful places without enduring pain.

But the pain required is the pain that also brings healing.

Because the surrender and letting go that will bring us to that place of peace replaces privilege with partnership.

Bigotry with new found best friends.

And contempt with compassion.

Isn't this what lies at the root of Jesus "opening their minds?"

"Open minds" are the opposite of "closed minds."

"Open minds" can accept the possibility of profound and penetrating change in how we live with one another.

"Open minds" can peer into the humanity of every person.

And "open minds" can glimpse the miracle of God transforming pain into paradise.

A long time ago, Julian of Norwich spent many years alone in a church cell, opening herself to the presence of God in a way that few, before or since, have done.

Here is some of what she discovered.

"She teaches us that God's love has nothing to do with rules and retribution and everything to do with mercy and compassion.

She shows us that our failings and transgressions are simply an opportunity to learn and grow.

They should be honored as such, but not dwelled upon.

She sees the sorrows of this life as tastes of Christ's passion.

She assures us that all passing pain will be changed into endless joy.

Most of all, Julian assures us that, no matter how things appear to us now, all is well.

Not just that creation is beautifully made to begin with.

Not just that everything will work out – in the end.

But that everything is all right, right now!

If only we can see through the eyes of love!

This standpoint is hard to maintain, as Julian admits.

But sometimes, we do sense the unity of all things.

In watching the sun rise.

Through giving birth.

Or by singing to God in community.

These miraculous moments provide glimpses into the cosmic design, allowing us to see that all is well.

But then we look away – and forget.

Because we so often forget, Julian goes to great lengths to remind us that the essence of God is love.

And while she refers to God as "He", she also insists time and again that God is beyond gender, calling God both Mother and Father.

'Throughout the time of my showings, I wished to know what our Beloved meant.

More than fifteen years later, the answer came in a spiritual vision.

This is what I heard.

'Would you like to know our Lord's meaning in all this?

Know it well: love is his meaning.

Who reveals this to you?

Love.

What does he reveal to you?

Love.

Why does he reveal it to you?

For love.

Stay with this and you will know more of the same.

You will never know anything but love, without end.'

And so what I saw most clearly is that love is his meaning.

God wants us to know that he loves us before he even made us, and this love has never diminished and never will.

All his actions unfold from this love.

And through this love he makes everything that happens meaningful to us.

For in this love we find everlasting life.

Our creation has a starting point, but the love in which he made us has no beginning.

That's because love is our true source." Mirabai Starr, modified.

And how do we get to that beautiful place?

Jesus tells us once again.

Turn around.

Repent.

Then, forgive.

Let go.

Surrender.

Release.

For then, the peace of God will rest in you.

And you shall rest in God's peace.

+amen.

