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Mark 12: 28-34

Sacred Earth, Sacred Word “Spirit of Compassion”

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Befriending the Dark Places

Suffering and Pain

We live in a culture, which seems to have an ever more difficult time dealing with pain. We try to avoid pain at all costs and that in itself comes at a high cost. For all life will have hardships and suffering and when they come (not if) we will find ourselves unprepared, if we have insisted we be pain free to date.

Before we can befriend the dark places, the pain and suffering that Creation Spirituality says is one of the fourfold paths we need to take, we need to look at why we avoid dealing with pain.

Let's begin with the big D Denial: We try and pretend it is not there. We pretend it does not hurt. Some days DENIAL is an acronym for “Don't Even Notice I Am Lying”. We will go to amazing lengths to pretend we aren't in pain. Somehow we think if we don't look at our pain squarely in the face, it will simply go away. Denial is the ostrich sticking its head in the sand.

Then, if we do recognize the pain we are in, we may decide it is just too much to have to deal with and we go into Numbing Mode – we then try and stuff our pain down via food, alcohol/drugs, constant busyness, such as being a workaholic.

And then, there is the third way we try and handle our pain, we try and Soften it when it is still giving us crashing blows with lies to ourselves and others such as, “I am having a

small problem”; instead of” I am in free fall heading for a major crash.”

And so we have it, pain must be faced and dealt with – not denied, sedated or minimized.

What would happen if every time pain came knocking at our door, we invited it in, welcomed it, offered it some tea? We have to catch ourselves, if we are going to move forward from our pain. We will need to move beyond these responses to pain of flight, fright, or freeze, because none of them adequately addresses our pain.

When we decide to deal with our pain, we have determined to give ourselves something more than just fleeing, being scared, paralyzed or stuck.

Let me just say a word here about acknowledging pain and how that can in some people lead to a crisis of faith. Time has taught me both professionally and personally that to face our pain can lead us to realizing that the faith we had counted on to date is now inadequate. The God we had to date, no longer works. In other words, if we have a God who always gives to us when asked to (like Santa) or a God who never lets anything bad happen to us (like a Circular Steel Wall) then when we have pain in our lives it seems like God is traitor, a joke, a liar - when we our Shangri-la now has pain as a permanent resident. Yet, we need not despair, for we need this crisis of faith more than we know, for we need the death of that kind of God. Why, because that understanding is no longer adequate for the world in which we now honestly live. Our pain invited us into a more mature and deeper relationship with who God actually is, not who we demand God to be. It moves us from the God we think we need - to the God we really do need.

Allowing our pain to break us wide open allows us to tap into the nectar. It is a catalyst for creativity, passion, peace, and compassion.

When we recognize we are in pain, we can begin to use that pain to have a deeper and thus more fulfilling relationship with God, a deeper and more fulfilling relationship with others, and a deeper and more fulfilling relationship with ourselves as we recognize and celebrate our strength, fortitude and resilience.

I have become increasingly concerned about living in a culture that is escalating our avoidance of pain. And thus I think it is no accident as our denial and avoidance of pain goes up, our understanding of and compassion toward others goes down.

We can use our pain, to better understand and thus respond to another's pain. That is one sure way to redeem being in pain. As Jason Gray sings, "Nothing is wasted in the hands of the Redeemer."

We are asked to love God, and love others as we love ourselves. And one way to guarantee that will happen is to befriend the dark places, feel pain (our and others) and respond with compassion, which looks a whole lot like love you can taste and feel. Compassion is nothing less than the balm our world needs, now more than ever. May we be compassionate today and in the days ahead toward our own pain and the pain of others. Attitude is everything, openness is the doorway that leads to creativity and thus our creative response – more about that as our series continues over the next few weeks!