

Many of you probably remember a strange occurrence during the liturgy almost a year ago. I was presiding at the altar when I turned paler than normal, started perspiring heavily, and then eventually left the altar after completing the Eucharistic prayer. Not everyone saw what was going on and only a few of you knew at least in part what was happening. At the time, some of you expressed concern, especially with my other health problems over the prior year or so.

Here's the back story, in case you have not heard it. After the peace and announcements, I had gone into the vesting sacristy to put on my chasuble. In a very simple motion of putting it over my head, I felt a shooting pain in my shoulder unlike anything I have felt before. I was bending over, trying to catch my breath, it hurt so badly. I was not sure what was going on. In addition to my prior health issues, I also knew of a fellow priest who had recently had a stroke with some of the same symptoms, so that was on my mind.

I came out and let Cathy and Janice know I was in pain. I got through the prayer—quickly. It was weird. When I left the altar, I washed my face and eventually Lynn and I went to the ER after the service was finished. The doctor did various exams. One was to have me hold my arm at a 90-degree angle, my hand pointing down, and then he pushed my arm backward. When he did, I jumped about a foot off the exam table. After I landed, the doctor said I probably had an issue with my rotator cuff. That was a relief! Eventually it was resolved with a cortisone shot and I gradually had less and less pain.

Now this story reminds me of the old joke about the patient going to the doctor and telling him, "Doctor, it hurts whenever I do this." And the doctor replies, "Well, don't do that." That's not bad advice—if you want to ignore the problem and live with a limited range of motion in life. For me, and I bet for many of you, that is not what we want to do. We want to live a full life. This is true, whether we are talking about our physical lives-- or our emotional and spiritual lives.

In fact, identifying, "where it hurts" is an important way for us to grow as people. Where do we hurt in our lives? Again, not just our physical aches and pains, but those other tender parts of our emotional and spiritual lives. The pain may come when we are poked by someone else. Or it may be a chronic pain we live with within our souls, regardless of our interactions with others.

One example of the pain I am talking about is how we respond to criticism. If a friend, an authority figure, a customer/client, a spouse, or a family member criticizes us, how do we respond? Is our response proportional to what was actually said? Does it stir up old memories of past criticism from a tough parent or early childhood bullies? Do we lash back and criticize the one criticizing us? Do we withdraw from the person? Do we become defensive? Depending on how we respond, it might reveal a place "where it hurts" in our life and relationships. And that self-awareness is the first step that can lead to healing in our lives.

Another example of “where it hurts” in our lives is our self-image (this may be related to how we respond to criticism). How do we see ourselves? One example of this is from a commercial (I think for Dove soap) in which an artist draws two portraits of a person based on a verbal description—the artist cannot see the model. The first description is given by the person herself; the second description by someone who just met the model. In the second description by the other person, the model is much more attractive- and the drawing is much more accurate! That commercial was a powerful example of how our physical self-image can get in the way of who we really are.

The same applies to our self-image about intangible things like confidence, abilities, character, and so forth. If we have a chronic pain over our self-image, we might say things about ourselves like, “I can’t do that... I always mess up... I am so stupid...” Whatever our painful self-image, once we identify “where it hurts,” then we can start to address it with God’s help in a way that can bring healing.

Probably the worst pain for us as people is when bad things happen in our lives. That hurt can be severe and it can last a long time. The death of a child is probably the worst personal pain I can imagine. That type of loss leads to questions like, “Why us? How can God allow this to happen? Am I being punished? Is God cruel or at least uncaring?” Those questions are real and they need to be asked in order to be honest about our pain. Otherwise we may try to suppress it and then that pain will come out in other ways over many years. Honesty is the first step in a long healing process for a pain like profound personal loss.

So where do we hurt today? It may be in one of the areas I have mentioned; or it may be somewhere else. Regardless of where our pain is located, it is important that we are aware of it, that we don’t try to deny or repress it, and that we come to God and to people that care in order to receive a “treatment plan” to get better. God does not want us to remain stuck in our pain with no hope for relief.

Here are some ways we can find healing:

First, be in community. For some of us who are more extroverted, that is easy to do. We inflict community on everyone around us, whether they want it or not! But if we are more introverted, more reserved, or maybe even depressed, this is more challenging. But it is not impossible. A helpful way out of our pain is to take the initiative—even small steps-- to be with people who care about us.

This will be harder for some of us. The “stuckness” we experience may be due to feelings we have like, “No one cares about me or understands me” or “My problems are too bad to share with others” or “Everyone else has their life together so much that they will look down on me.” If you feel that way, you are not alone—but those feelings are not the whole story. There are people who care. Your problems are the same or at least similar to many people. And no matter how “shiny” someone looks on the outside, **ALL** of us have problems of some type or another.

The risk we need to take-- the visit to the ER, so to speak-- is to come someplace where we can find community. The good news is that we have multiple options here for people in pain. We have a new Community of Hope ministry in which people have been trained to be with you and listen. We have groups of peers that meet, from the Bible study and EFM to Home Groups, the Mothers Group, and AA

groups. There is a very good grief group in a nearby church. There are clergy and religious here who love and pray for you and who would be delighted to meet with you. Our clergy can also refer you to professionals who can help in more formal ways if needed. Informally, there are many loving people in this community that can have a cup of coffee and help us with our pain, just through being there.

Second, know that God knows us and our case history. God understands our pain. We know this through the story of Jesus, God-made-human. Jesus experienced all the joys and suffering of being one of us. So when we pray, we know Jesus “gets it” and joins with us in praying for whatever we are going through. Jesus personally knew betrayal, abandonment, false accusations, suffering, and an unjust death. Our specific story will be different in the particulars—but know that Jesus understands our pain.

So because of Jesus, prayer makes sense as a way for us to receive healing. We do not need to withdraw into ourselves. We do not need to self-medicate to deaden the pain through drugs, alcohol, shopping, food, sex, or whatever other escapes we have used in the past. When grounded in loving community, we can turn to God in prayer and find help for whatever pain we face. It might be instantaneous or it might take years—but God cares about us and God can help us find healing and relief from our pain, whatever it is.

Today as you come forward for communion, I invite you to bring your pain with you. As best you can, pray for God’s help and healing in your life. As you receive the sacrament, receive it trusting God’s healing presence in your life and believing that this heavenly food is medicine for your soul. Then take the next step-- reach out to people in this community and you will find people who care. In this community, you will be able to pray with others about your pain. And you will find that God cares and is waiting for you. Amen.