

One of the joys of being a pastor is that I get invited into some very sacred spaces.

I’m not talking about actual places or buildings, but the inner experience of individuals, the holiest of holy places where people live.

It’s a privilege to be welcomed into those spaces as they share their longings, hopes, hurts and failures.

However, I don’t believe that being involved in the thick of everyday lives was intended to be only for pastors.

I believe that God created the church so that we would be priests to one another, as we say “the priesthood of all believers” sharing life together, bearing one another’s burdens and being able to be vulnerable ourselves.

When we welcome strangers, share who we are and let people be less than perfect, we act like Jesus.

He was always for people. He didn’t give them tickets for a guilt trip or scorn their shame.

Instead, he listened, blessed, and forgave. He didn’t turn away. He embraced as he redeemed.

This is what a community of faith does. We exist not for ourselves, but in order to love others as God has first loved us.

Our best practices are when we help those who are lost to be found, when we create spaces for people to be welcomed for who they are, and to have moments where their suffering can be redeemed.

Several years ago, I was at a conference for pastors, a time of spiritual renewal. A young minister in his twenties and I (I was in my forties) continued a conversation after a group time.

We had been discussing relationships, and we had connected over teenage issues with our fathers.

But this private conversation took a turn into one of those sacred spaces when he told me he was 15 or 16 when he was beaten by his father.

He said it was a teenage thing he had done, but his father just lost it and began to hit him, the first time and only time.

But the fear and humiliation lasted a long time.

It was a small town he lived in, he told me, and he ran to his grandparents’ house; no one was there, and he flung himself on a bed in the room where he often spent the night, just as the psalmist wrote, drenching the bed with his tears.

His grandparents came home after he had been there an hour or so. It was lunchtime; the tears were gone, but the eyes still rubbed red.

He said the meal was prepared, the table set, and they ate. Yet he couldn’t tell them why he was there; it was their son who had hit him.

Then he went home.

Nothing had changed, and everything had changed; but he couldn’t say anything, he could not tell anyone.

A few years ago, he said he learned how his father had been scared, too, hurt, ashamed by his own actions, but he couldn’t tell anyone either.

He looked at me, as we both had tears, and said, “I wonder where he went to cry.”

Some things happen that hurt us so deeply, that are so personal and private, we cannot talk about it.

We cannot offer it to someone else for help. Sure, we are glad to help others who hurt, but there is that hurt we keep to ourselves.

The psalmist’s words could be your words: *“I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears...”*

The truth is that there are some wounds that do not heal, some losses that are not recoverable.

Life gives each of us, at one time or another before we die, bowls of tears to drink.

When you hurt but can't tell anyone...But in that hurt is the power of the gospel.

In Jesus Christ...the preacher in our reading from Hebrews says that it is at the very point of and in the darkness of his suffering that Jesus claims us as his brothers and sisters and is made perfect for our salvation.

As Michael Mayne has written, "Our most painful human wounds are most intimately connected to the sufferings of God, for in Christ [God]...knows ...what it is to live, to know pain at its potentially most destructive, to face desolation and die."

Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane echoed the prayer of Psalm 6. Jesus flooded the bed of that night with his tears; our Lord praying in the midst of all those "workers of evil" who were coming for him.

Jesus suffered on our behalf, and as the psalmist asked that his prayer be accepted, that we be delivered for the sake of God's steadfast love, so it is that in the power of the resurrection, God can change our hurt into part of that same miracle of love.

When you hurt but can't tell anyone, it's like being locked inside a kind of private room behind some cancerous door through which we cannot leave and through which others cannot reach us.

Our best efforts leave us unable to penetrate that private hell.

But, as we see in the resurrection appearances of Jesus, God's love and compassion are not rendered powerless by locked doors.

God's love doesn't stand outside, helplessly knocking. Rather, it goes right through the locked doors, stands inside the huddle of fear and shame, of loneliness and isolation and breathes out peace.

No wound is so trivial that the love of God is not concerned with it. No pain is so deep, so old, that the love of God cannot reach it.

The fact that the hurt is in what we call the 'past' makes no difference to the power of God's love. All times are open and present to the eternal God.

Alden Solovy gives voice to this eternal power in his own "Whispered Prayer", that when you hurt but can't tell anyone, whispering to God is where you can begin.

He writes:

*Your whispered prayer,  
Your secret hope,  
Your quiet yearning  
Have holiness and power.  
They resound in the heavens  
And echo on high.  
They are drum and cymbal,  
Trumpet and horn,  
Proclaiming your faith,  
Music of generations,  
Proclaiming your hope,  
Hymns of the heart,  
Proclaiming your dedication  
To the God of All Being,  
Source and Shelter,  
Rock and Redeemer,  
Light and Truth.*

*Your whispered prayer  
Is the song of the ages.  
Your secret hope  
Is the light of tomorrow.  
Your quiet yearning  
Is the voice of eternity.*

*Blessed are You, Adonai,  
who hears prayer.*

Everyone needs emotional and spiritual outlets, as well as connectedness and community.

No one should fall through the cracks because we don't care enough to reach out to them, listen to them, spend time with them or provide for their basic needs, including their mental health needs.

Over the last several generations, our world has changed.

Our social fabric has started to fray, break, and unravel as the support systems of natural connectedness that used to keep people from suffering alone in silence are no longer in place.

In her book “Christianity After Religion,” Diana Butler Bass writes: “We want lives of authenticity, meaning and purpose. In traditional societies these were part of the social fabric handed down from one generation to the next.”

“Now, the ties that bind have been cut,” Bass continues. “These qualities are no longer givens. In mobile, hyper-individualistic society, we search on our own for things that used to be born into us.”

And sometimes, especially if someone is suffering from abuse, addiction, trauma, they struggle to find meaning, purpose, or authenticity even when they search for them.

But no one should have to search alone.

While others figure out where to draw the line on guns or greed or hunger, the church ought to start drawing the line on loneliness and isolation, fear, and shame, those among us who hurt but can’t tell anyone.

We ought to say, “Never again. We won’t stand for it. Not in our communities, not in our schools, not in our workplaces. It has no place in our society.”

We follow a savior shepherd who searches for the one off by himself or herself, for the “sheep” who is alone, lost, and scared.

The church must be a people who care for one another, and who do not tolerate loneliness and isolation, fear and shame that too often leads to destructive consequences for both the individual and the larger community.

Everyone needs to know they are loved.

Everyone needs to know they are accepted.

Everyone needs to know they are forgiven.

Everyone needs to know they are not alone.

That was Jesus’ promise as he sent the disciples into the world saying, “I am with you always to the end of the age.”

And it needs to be our promise as we make our way into the world on behalf of Jesus, ‘always with one another.’

As I said earlier, we as a church, as the people of God exist not for ourselves, but in order to love others as God has first loved us: to preach and to practice love, acceptance, forgiveness, inclusiveness.

To those who hurt, but can’t tell anyone, what I hope you will hear me, on behalf of the church, tell you:

You matter.  
You’re important.  
You’re loved.

And your presence on this earth  
makes a difference  
whether you see it or not.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.