

The Stewardship of Pain

A Sermon Preached for Highland Baptist Church

Matthew 25:14-30

November 15, 2020

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

If I were to ask you the question, “What is your pain level right now?” how might you respond? On a scale of one to ten, with one being very little to no pain, and 10 being the worst pain you can imagine – how would you describe your pain level?

Many of you know that I have a brittle bone disorder and have broken over 30 bones in my life. And in far too many hospital rooms and ambulances than I care to remember, I have been asked this question. And I think, at different points along the way, I have answered every single number along that scale.

I remember being in the emergency room once with a particularly bad broken bone in my leg – it wasn’t just broken, doctors said it was shattered, actually. My pain level was off the chart. But my doctor was out of town, and because he was the one who was most familiar with my condition, it was determined that the best course of action was for us to wait for him to get back in town to do the surgery. That meant that for the next couple days, the goal was to keep me as comfortable as possible, with a shattered bone, while we waited.

So I was given a morphine pump, with a button that I could press every 9 minutes....to relieve me from my pain. It was the only way I could make it through those couple of days.

Of course, having a morphine pump wasn’t any sort of long-term solution. In order to repair my shattered bone – I would need surgery and a metal rod in my leg. I would need to be in a cast and use a wheelchair while my bones healed. I would need to do physical therapy in the swimming pool to gain my strength and use a walker to slowly learn to walk again.

Usually my bones have healed fairly easily, but this time it was a bit more complex, because it hadn’t been a clear break. I actually still have this really weird jagged spot on my right leg because of this particular break. It’s a reminder that even though we might heal from some of the painful experiences in our lives, we’re never quite the same again. Pain changes us. As Anne Lamott says, “You never completely get over loss...but you come through. It’s like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly – that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with a limp.”

The interesting thing is that we tend to treat physical pain more seriously than we do emotional pain for some reason, although scientists tell us that when we have a broken heart, it activates the same portion of our brains that would be affected if we were in physical pain.

If someone walked into our church and fell and broke their leg – we would surround them with immediate support and care. If someone came in and shared that they had a broken heart, despite our best intentions, I imagine that the responses wouldn't be quite the same.

And yet, at different times in our lives and in different ways, we all carry within us – pain. It's part of all of our stories. Some of our pain is simply more visible than others.

And just like what happened to me in the emergency room years ago, when you and I have emotional pain that just seems too great to manage, we do whatever we can to try to numb the pain. And sometimes, this is what we must do in order to survive. Sometimes the pain is too great to do anything else.

But other times, we try to just avoid the pain, or deny that it's even there. Maybe we try to hide it or sweep it under the rug. Maybe we minimize it, like it's really no big deal, or we try to run away from it. Because the thought of actually experiencing that pain – is sometimes too overwhelming.

Many of us spend so much of our time and energy doing this, sometimes without even realizing it. Maybe for you, mindlessly wandering over social media is your preferred method of distraction, or endless hours of Netflix. Or maybe for you it's shopping – buying new clothes, getting a new car, or the latest technology – or whatever it is that injects you with momentary happiness to numb the pain you're feeling inside. Maybe it's alcohol. Maybe it's eating or drinking or taking whatever it is that makes you feel good in the moment. Maybe you work long hours to numb the pain – because if you just keep sending more emails, scheduling more meetings, and going at the same grueling pace, you simply won't have time to feel the pain that's buried just beneath the surface. You'll forget that it's even there. Or maybe it's buried so deeply that you can't even name what you've done to get it there.

Whatever these methods are – they may help us to survive, but like the morphine pump, they are not long-term solutions. They may leave us feeling good in the moment, but that moment is always short-lived, and minutes, hours, or days later, we're suddenly needing to click the button again. Because we've still got something broken within us – that no amount of numbing or hiding or distracting or running away from can ever truly begin to heal.

But I believe there is another option for us. A better option for us. What if we chose to be stewards of our pain instead? A couple years ago, I came across some writings by Frederick Buechner on the stewardship of our pain. Like Buechner, I had always considered "stewardship" to be this word we use in church to talk about our money and how we care for the resources God has entrusted to us. I had never made the connection that we can steward our pain, but like Buechner suggests, I would like to invite us to read the Parable of the Talents from Matthew 25 today with this idea in mind.

In the parable, a master entrusts his three servants with different amounts of money, called talents. To the first, he gives five talents, to another two, and to another one. Now, a talent was

worth about 20 years' of wages for the average worker, so these were no small amounts of money. And it's interesting to me that the servants all receive different amounts. Why wouldn't the master give them all the same amounts? That seems more fair, doesn't it?

And yet, isn't that true of real life – and isn't that especially true of our experiences of pain? I made an aside in a sermon a couple weeks ago that there should be some kind of quota for the hard things we experience in life. One person surely should not have to bear so much. Or one year like this one should not contain so much hardship – it's not fair! And yet we know all too well that life doesn't work that way – the parable points that out from the very beginning.

Life hands each of the servants something different, with no rhyme or reason why. But the point of the parable isn't as much about what is handed over to the servants – it's what they do with it that matters.

The first and second servants get to work at once. Using all that has been given to them, they trade their talents and end up doubling them. And when he returns, the Master is overjoyed with them, saying, "Well done, my good and faithful servant!"

But the parable pays far more attention to the third servant, who actually receives the smallest amount. Afraid that he won't be able to do much with his talent and that he will upset his master, he digs a hole in the ground and buries the money instead.

Now, before we criticize him, it's important for us to recognize that the third servant makes what is by far the safest decision about what to do with the talent. Because money-changers required a fee, and theft and robbery were so prevalent at that time, the best way to keep your money safe and secure was to bury it in the ground. Earlier in Matthew 13:44, when Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field – he's not just making that up. The early readers of the text would have known that it was common practice to bury one's treasure in the ground.

Having taken this precaution, the third servant would not have to pay from his own pocket if the money were lost or stolen, and he would not lose sleep worrying that his investment might not give him anything in return. And so at the end of the day, he decides to play it safe.

New Testament scholar David Garland says this about the parable, "The first two servants took risks and were rewarded. The last simply tried to protect himself and, as a result, lost everything."

And I can't help but wonder if that's exactly what you and I are trying to do when we bury our pain. We're just trying to protect ourselves. So when life gets hard, we just bottle it up or tuck it away so that no one will see it and we don't have to worry about it causing any problems. And yet, after awhile, like the servant in the story, we lose something along the way when we do this. Because a buried life, a numb life, is no kind of life at all.

You may have heard of the writer Kate Bowler who was diagnosed with an incurable Cancer at age 35. Kate is also a professor of Christian history at Duke University – and in the midst of one of the most painful times of her life, she wrote a book about her experiences, called *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*.

In an interview with *TIME Magazine*, Kate was asked about how this experience had changed her, and she said that most of all, it had changed her as a parent and how she interacted with her son. After her diagnosis, she said, “I decided that my job [was] not to try to make [his] world safe [anymore]. [Before], I thought you just create a beautiful, Instagram-y bubble for your kid, and that’s parenting. And then I realized that I was going to be the worst thing that happened to him if this went badly. I couldn’t live with that. So I decided that my new parenting philosophy is that I can’t protect my son from the pain of the world, but I can show him that there is truth and beauty in the midst of it. And if I can [help] make him that kind of person, then I have won as a parent.”¹

I can’t help but wonder if something similar is true for the parents of 2020 – for whom I have so much respect as you parent your children in the midst of one of the hardest years we have ever encountered. Because try as we might, we can’t protect our children from this one, which is going to be especially true in the coming weeks as we approach the holidays. We can’t shelter them from the hard things, but we can walk through the hard things with them. And together, we can learn to see that there is still beauty and goodness, even in the midst of it all.

An Australian company named Panadoll, that produces over-the-counter pain killers, has the following motto: “When pain is gone, life takes its place.” And maybe it’s a catchy slogan. But I would argue that sometimes, if not most times, life takes place even in the pain. The question is, how will you and I respond? How will we steward the pain we have been given in this life, and especially the painful realities we have encountered in 2020? I’d like to end by sharing a few disclaimers about what that might look like (and not look like) in the days ahead...

One. Being good stewards of our pain doesn’t mean we glorify our pain. It doesn’t mean we magically discover that everything happens for a reason or that there is always purpose behind our pain. Life is hard. Bad things, even awful things happen to good people, and there could never possibly be any good reasons to justify them. Being a steward of our pain doesn’t try to explain it away or wrap it up in a pretty pink bow.

Two. Being good stewards of our pain doesn’t happen alone. It happens in community. There is no evidence that the third servant in the story ever engages with anyone else until the master comes back. He hides his talents, and in so doing, he hides himself. But the first two servants go out and trade their talents with other people – and it’s somehow in that trading with one another that what they have been given transforms into something more. And I believe the same is true for us. If we’re really going to learn to be good stewards of our pain, we need each other along the way.

¹ <http://time.com/5118044/kate-bowler-interview-cancer-faith/>

Sometimes, it means we need the help of a licensed mental health professional. If something you hear today or something you are experiencing this year triggers a pain that has been hidden pretty deep beneath the surface, the other ministers and I would love to connect you with a counselor to help you unpack that experience and to learn how to steward that pain. Just like the example I used earlier, if you came to me with a broken bone, I would absolutely get you to a hospital. If we have a difficult experience buried within us, why wouldn't we seek out someone trained to help us with these kinds of pains, too? I believe that counseling is one of the healthiest ways we can all steward our pain – and it's another reminder that we can't do this work on our own.

And three. Being good stewards of our pain is always going to be a risk, just like we see in the parable. Any time we choose to engage with our stories in a deeper way, and to share those stories with others, there is absolutely no guarantee of what the outcome will be. It's scary, because to bring our pain out into the light of day is a very vulnerable thing. But what I do know is this: I truly believe it's a risk worth taking - if we really trust God to do a work of resurrection in our lives.

After all, Jesus was no stranger to pain, was he? But his journey also reminds us that pain never gets the last word of our stories. As Buechner once said, "The worst things in life are never the last things."

And if you and I are willing to trust God even in the midst of the very worst things, even in our pain, even in our grief, even in our anger, even in our hurt, even in the dark, even in the tomb, I believe that we might just be surprised at what God does next.

Amen.