

The Wounds We Carry, the Seeds that Grow

Anguish in the Garden

Jesus took the risk to invite James, John, and Peter into the garden to pray with him. He invited them to enter into his brokenness, his anguish, his pain, his confusion, his fear. The fact that they fell asleep takes nothing away from the invitation. Remember, it was night. The darkness which surrounded them reflected the night that was within them. But their drowsiness does not detract from their initial willingness to enter the garden with Jesus. They were tired. It was late. They fell asleep. Let us not be too hard on them. Who of us has not fallen asleep now and then when we have been invited to pray, to stay awake, to watch and wait? Our spirit is willing but our bodies are tired.

We remember that these same three were invited by Jesus to go to the mountain with him where they witnessed the transfiguration. Then it was easy to stay awake. Something exciting was happening right before their eyes. There was Jesus and Moses and Elijah all meeting together on the mountain. It was a glorious moment --one that these three wanted to savor and keep. Then they wanted time to stand still. They wanted to pitch some tents and camp out on the mountain of glory.

But now they found themselves in the garden of sorrow. It is easier to sleep when all hope seems gone. In this garden grew plants of pain; flowers of anguish. There were no clouds of glory or brilliant lights. No neon signs to keep them awake. No stunning displays of dazzling divinity. Here they found the heart of humanity. The sacred heart. The broken heart.

When pain becomes more than one can bear, the advice is: get some rest, you'll feel better in the morning.

What is so human and so holy about this invitation to the garden of Gethsemane is that Jesus wanted his closest friends to share his brokenness, his sorrow, his pain. He invited them into the deepest cavern of his character. Just as on the mountain he invited them to catch a glimpse of his glory, now in the garden he wanted them to sneak a peek at his pain.

When another invites us into the chamber of sorrow, we will never escape without being changed. When we welcome another into our garden of pain, we say, "My heart is filled with sorrow to the point of death. Remain here and stay awake" (Mark 14:34). We don't expect her to say any words that will comfort us or recite any message of condolence. We only desire that she stay with us, remain with us, remind us that we are not alone.

When we take the risk to respond to the invitation of another to enter her garden, we tread softly, gently. We know words have no meaning here. Only love and presence speak with tenderness here.

A good friend who has suffered deeply and experienced great losses in her life, now makes it a point to go to those who are grieving in her parish after the death of a loved one. She is motivated to do so by her own sense of loss and grief. Recently, she told me that when someone says to her, "I wish I could go and offer my sympathy," she replies, "How can you not go?" This woman has been to the garden herself and she knows the pain. Even more, she knows how important it is for someone else to share the pain. That is why her ministry of grief-sharing has become second nature to her.

There will be many moments on our pilgrim's path when we will be invited into another's garden. Tonight, Jesus takes us into Gethsemane to learn a little more about grief, about prayer, about love. Jesus invites us to pray not from a heart that sings but from one that screams.

In the garden, Jesus invites us to love not in the winning but in the losing. And when we learn a little bit more about this quality of love, we will be able to invite others into our garden when the pain is impossible to bear alone. We will learn how healing can only come from a heart that has been broken.

(Fr. Joseph Nassal, C.P.P.S., Passionate Pilgrims, C.P.P.S. Resource Series, # 13, The Messenger Press, Carthagena, Ohio, 1993, pp. 71-73)

Thirsty Souls

Spirituality is learned in living experience. For people bathed in the blood of Christ, our spirituality is found first in our own experiences of suffering. In our wounds, we learn the tender compassion of our God. In the inventory of our own wounds, we find the call to live the spirituality of the Precious Blood.

Many events along the way have shaped my personal response to the spirituality of the blood of Christ. Certainly the most telling was my brother's suicide in June of 1987. A few weeks after Ed's funeral, I left parish work and went to Italy for a meeting of formation directors from our congregation. Because the memory of Ed's death was so fresh in my mind and the grief so present in my heart and soul, as I walked on the path of St. Gaspar's life during those weeks -- Rome, Giano, Sonnino -- the spirituality came alive. It found a home in my broken heart. I could no longer keep it at arm's length. Here were the seeds of suffering. Here were the seeds of liberation.

Gaspar's devotion to the Precious Blood deepened for him when he spent years in prison and in exile for refusing to compromise his beliefs when Napoleon occupied Rome. In his own experiences of suffering and exile, Gaspar's compassion deepened and the formation of a religious congregation named for the Blood of Christ was conceived. He knew that the fire in his belly was his passion for the Precious Blood.

But Gaspar knew he could not live this passion alone. Like the prophet for whom the Word of God was a burning ember that burned a hole in his soul; no matter how hard he tried to keep the fire inside, he could not. Gaspar knew he had to let it out. So he gave birth to a religious community that would be a dynamic force for spiritual renewal both in the church and in society.

This renewal flowed from the cross in the redeeming stream of Christ's blood. I believe our mission is one of reconciliation and renewal. A mission that is found in our own experience of the paschal mystery. We are to be those wounded servants who carry on the work of the reign of God that Jesus gave to his friends on the night before he died.

We don't do this alone but in the context of a caring, compassionate community. As people who gather "in the company of friends," we accompany one another in this journey toward true and lasting freedom found in the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ.

It is because we know our own pain, our own suffering, our own experiences of sorrow; because we know our own wounds, that we are called to share them with one another. We allow these experiences to motivate us to be with others in their pain, in their suffering, in their sorrow. And in doing so, together, we realize God's gift of redemption.

(Fr. Joseph Nassal, C.P.P.S., Passionate Pilgrims, C.P.P.S. Resource Series # 13, The Messenger Press, Carthagen, Ohio, 1993, pp. 5-6)

If the Grain of Wheat Doesn't Die

"Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit" (John 12:24)

There is a similarity between the Cross and the grain which little-by-little gets bent over, until it is buried in the ground, as Christ on the Cruz. The inclination of Christ on the Cross, has two meanings: one of reverence before the Father in order to say to Him: 'in Your hands I commend my spirit'; and the other is that of service to all peoples in order to say to us: 'take, eat and drink, this is my Body and my Blood given for you'.

For Christ, the first value in his life is the Father, and then follow his neighbors, and finally Himself. It is for the Father that he accepts suffering, marginalization, derision, solitude...and he says to us: 'one who loves his life, loses it, while the one who hates his life in this world, preserves it to eternal life' (John 12:25). That is why to seek the applause of others, to try to call attention to oneself and to stand out, to always want to be the first, to think that others should do everything as I think it should be done, to forget that others walk along with us, is to lose life. But to seek the success of others, to seek the happiness of others and to live without fear and to think that others also have part of the truth...is to win life.

Sometimes our falling to the earth and dying, as the grain of wheat, only remains on the surface in order to be seen, much as show windows. We must die in silence, without blowing our trumpets, without fireworks and clanging cymbals. The rest must notice our death, not because we publish it, but because they miss us on the pedestal which we made for ourselves and because they notice it by our lives which are happier, less overwhelmed and less strained...

Christ has given everything that he had for us, and for us he has died, has fallen to the earth and his seed has been watered by his Blood. And what has been born? A new Humanity, saved, redeemed, freed of slavery, a People of Sons and Daughters ready to walk together, forgetting one's own way, in order that between all of us, we might eliminate the obstacles that we constantly find and thus no one gets lost nor remains behind.

To all our members...much happiness and a wish that we might all be "wheat" , which in order to give fruit, must fall to the earth."

(P. Paulino Hernández, C.P.P.S. Boletín Provincia Ibérica, Year II, No. 7, July 1989, pp. 1-2)