

“Pain and suffering have come into your life, but remember pain, sorrow, suffering are but the kiss of Jesus – a sign that you have come so close to Him that He can kiss you.”
~Mother Teresa

Suffering and the Kiss of Jesus

By Chrissy M. Dennis

I wonder if this quote would be a first choice for the church bulletin board.

Suffering. It is a topic I suspect most of us avoid and yet, I wonder if it is a topic we need to engage with more, especially in our churches.

Do we believe suffering in this lifetime is, as Mother Teresa believed, to be a sure indicator that we are near to Jesus, or do we believe suffering is a sure indicator that something is very wrong with us?

Maybe for most believers, our theology of suffering falls somewhere between these two scenarios, but it has been my experience that a large number of believers shy away from suffering, let alone the idea that it draws us nearer to the heart of God.

Because let's face it, nobody *wants* to suffer. It's not exactly comfortable. It's mysterious and packed full of unknowns. There are far more questions than answers. We don't like that, and why not? We like to be in control. We like to have all the answers. Suffering leaves little room for that.

I wonder if that's why we try to explain suffering away. I wonder if that's why we try to "fix" it. When our bank accounts are looking low, we can easily pull up our statement and see exactly where our money has gone. When driving and that line draws dangerously close to the "E", we immediately put gas in our car. These are things we can explain. These are things we can fix.

Maybe that's why suffering is so hard for us. We can't explain it. We can't fix it.

But we sure try.

I accepted Jesus when I was five years old. I have been around many churches and met many believers. This list is not exhaustive, but I want to share with you some of the scenarios I have come across over the years.

A couple decides to leave their pastoral ministry because the church blames the death of their baby boy on an unrepentant sin.

A friend tells me anybody who has schizophrenia is demon-possessed.

After deciding to take their daughter off life support, a couple is told they should have had more faith and waited for healing.

Why are these the first explanations that pop up for why someone is suffering? Sin. Demons. Lack of faith. I am not claiming these three reasons never play a role in why we suffer, but I think we, as Christians, are doing a huge disservice when we try to give an explanation at all. The truth is none of us really knows why we suffer. I don't know that there is an answer, but we are a species who need to be in control. We need all the answers.

But what if it causes more harm than good to try and explain it? What if, by trying to fix it, we make it worse? Wrongly claiming that a person's struggles are a result of sin, demons, or lack of faith can spiral them into serious doubts, shame, fear, and perhaps even lead to them isolating from the Church. That is a heartbreaking reality, because what that struggling individual needs is community, people surrounding them in unconditional love, without trying to explain it away, or fix it.

I am a single mom who fosters two beautiful little girls. I also struggle with depression and anxiety, as well as a diagnosis of Fibromyalgia. Some days, I function just fine. Other days, depression and anxiety are brutal monsters. I have struggled with mental illness since I was a teenager. I have had people pray for healing, and eventually walk away because healing didn't happen. I have had people "see" demons on me and cast off every spirit of anxiety, depression, etc. possible. I have had people claim I am not trying hard enough or don't have enough faith. I have been dealt the lack of faith card, the sin card, the demon card, and more, far too often.

Now, I'm beginning to ponder. Has any of that actually been instrumental in helping me heal? No. If anything, it has left me feeling lonely, doubtful, ashamed, and less of a Christian because I struggle with mental illness. I have felt isolated and too broken to be allowed

friendships or community. Many people have walked away from me because of my struggles, and that has been heartbreaking.

It is only recently that I have begun asking different questions. What if I struggle because we live in a broken world, and not because I am demon-possessed, or because I've sinned, or because I lack faith? What if my struggle constantly reminds me of my great need for Jesus? (Which it does, by the way). What if God is using my struggle to *refine* my faith? What if my faith would be a lot weaker if I didn't have these daily struggles? What if God can use my voice to speak into the hearts of others who struggle? What if I'm actually closer to Jesus in the struggle, than I would be if I was free from mental illness?

I don't know the answers to these questions, but I didn't write this article to answer questions. I wrote it to ask, to ponder, and to invite you, the Church, to ponder with me.

What if we simply walked with people who suffer, without trying to explain it? What if we were present, instead of trying to fix it? What if we accepted suffering as an expected part of life, instead of trying to stop it?

Does that mean we should never pray or hope for healing? Of course not. We absolutely should because God is the God of healing and hope. But if healing doesn't come, can we, as the Church, surround each other in love and in the presence of Jesus, instead of trying to fix or explain it? We don't always know the will of God, but we do know that He is good. Suffering is a part of life. Nowhere in Scripture does it teach we will live a life free from suffering. Actually, if anything, we are promised the opposite. You only have to flip through a few pages of the Bible to see suffering was a regular occurrence for many.

I recently watched a *Grey's Anatomy* episode where one of the main characters was struggling with her faith. As she was treating a dying, Jewish Rabbi, she shared her own struggles, lamenting that life was not fair. The Rabbi so beautifully responded with:

Fair? Was it fair when Isaac went blind and then his child betrayed him? And where was the fairness when Sara had to wait 99 years before she had a child, and God said, "Sacrifice him"? And Moses couldn't even get past the bouncer to the Promised Land. And like I said, I'm not up on the sequel, but from what I hear, Jesus got a raw deal. Nobody in the Bible lived a life free of suffering or injustice, or it wouldn't have been a best seller. And if they lived lives like that, why should ours be different?

Now, if people only believed in God when things were good, I guarantee you, after the Holocaust, not a single Jew would be a believer¹.

A life free from suffering is not what the Bible promises. It does not promise healing from every ailment or injustice, and it certainly does not promise a life void of any kind of pain. Why, then, are we surprised when suffering touches us?

I get it. Nobody wants to suffer. Nobody wants to see others suffer. Maybe that's a large part of why we want to fix it. I don't believe that in itself is wrong, but when our faith is rattled when healing doesn't come, or in our frustration, we make claims that healing is hindered by a lack of faith, or from sin, I wonder if we need to re-think suffering.

I have a friend who has walked with me through highs, lows, and the lowest of lows. I remember asking her one day, "Why haven't I been healed of all this? When will healing happen?" What she said was so simple, and yet so profound.

"Maybe you'll never be healed. Maybe you'll struggle the rest of your life, but you won't struggle in Heaven."

Ultimately, I have no idea if it's God's will for me to be healed from mental illness. I don't know if my story will be one of instant healing. I don't know if healing will come gradually. I don't know if healing will come at all. I don't know if I struggle because of sin, or lack of faith, or demons, or genetics, or life circumstances, or all of the above (or none). What I do know is that nothing brings me to my knees in absolute need more than this struggle does, and maybe (even if I don't feel it) that means I'm closer to Jesus than I would be if I wasn't struggling.

Perhaps close enough, as Mother Teresa said, for Jesus to kiss me.

*But God, when You choose
To leave mountains unmovable
Oh give me the strength to be able to sing
It is well with my soul²*

¹ *Grey's Anatomy*, Season 14, Episode 17, "One Day Like This," directed by Kevin McKidd, aired March 29, 2018, on ABC.

² MercyMe, "Even If," recorded 2016-2017, Fair Trade/Columbia, track 5 on *Lifer*, 2017, compact disc.

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