

“Stewardship of Pain”

Psalm 130 & 46:10, Matthew 11:28-30, John 10:10 & Revelation 21:4

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Prayer for Understanding Ever present Lord, we thank you for your word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Holy Spirit open our eyes to the signs of your presence, open our ears to your voice and open our minds to your wisdom. Amen.

General George Patton said. “Success is how high you bounce when you hit bottom.”

David was a good steward of pain. David had a life with devastating, painful lows during which he expressed his pain, worshiped, prayed, hoped, and waited. Singing is praying twice. Prayer is a primary way God transforms us. David was a gifted harpist and singer. David wrote most of the psalms that have inspired and comforted a multitude of people.

Many psalms follow a pattern. Pain is described, followed by a stewardship component; lamenting, grieving, agonizing, venting, crying, screaming, confessing, repenting, changing, praying, worshiping, hoping, waiting, doing, evolving, followed by a redemption component. The pain in the psalms is severe, debilitating, awful. Sometimes the pain is from uncontrollable circumstances and sometimes from poor choices. In all situations, God is with us, guiding us, carrying us out of the pain often in an agonizingly slow journey.

King Saul was anxious, agitated, and fearful. David often played the harp for Saul. David sang, prayed, worshipped and hoped with Saul, which calmed, refreshed, and encouraged Saul. David was a pioneer therapeutic music provider. We are blessed to have Mary, an exceptional therapeutic music provider, who also plays the harp.

Saul became jealous of David and ordered David killed. For seven years, David fled and hid from Saul, sometimes in caves, other times in the wilderness. David endured harsh conditions, separation from family and friends and the constant threat of death. David kept praying, singing, worshiping, and hoping.

Eventually, David became king and was renowned for praying, worshipping God, and relying on God. And David made plenty of painful mistakes such as adultery, then having the husband killed to cover up his adultery. David’s family was a painful mess with a miscarriage, dead sons, a daughter raped, murder, armed rebellion by David’s sons against him, a minefield of dysfunction, and piles of broken relationships. David made many painful parenting mistakes and was frequently an awful husband. David was plagued with pain from both circumstances and poor choices. David kept trying to grow in love. David owned his mistakes. David named the pain. David kept trying to dig himself out of the pain. Through every pain, David kept worshipping God, playing the harp, singing, praying, hoping.

David sings: **Psalm 130 NLT “From the depths of despair, O Lord, I call for your help. Hear my cry, O Lord. Pay attention to my prayer. Lord, if you kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive? But you offer forgiveness, that we might learn to revere you. I am counting on the Lord; yes, I am counting on God. I have put my hope in God’s word. I long for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is steadfast love. God’s redemption overflows. God will redeem Israel from every kind of sin.”**

Much has been written about the stewardship of pain. I do not believe that God ever inflicts anyone with pain, trials, or hardship. God is pure goodness, love, joy, and peace. God does redeem pain, trials, and hardship by bringing good out of pain.

I trust the Holy Spirit to translate this sermon for you, because I have a vague understanding of the stewardship of pain. I struggle to articulate how God got me through my seasons of pain and how I am transformed by pain.

Stewardship of pain is letting the universal human experience of pain become an amplifier of empathy, compassion, wisdom, and community. The ultimate example is Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus endured horrible pain, suffering, and abuse. Jesus died. Jesus rose to abundant eternal life. Jesus’ stewardship of pain ensures us that everyone will make it through every pain to pleasure, through every death to eternal life. Jesus is our guide through pain. Jesus said: **John 10:10 NRSV “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”** Jesus named his pain, prayed to God about his pain, and traded the suffering of the cross into

salvation for all. Stewardship of pain is hoping in the tension of crucifixion and resurrection, suffering and abundant life, grief and joy.

Stewardship of pain is a radical shift away from perceiving pain as against us to pain being a way to learn, transform, and love. I do not like this concept. I want to avoid pain. I never want to see another endure pain. I want to fix pain, alleviate pain, and remove pain.

Stewardship of pain is a radical shift from stewing in our pain to actively processing our pain, from letting our pain erupt to channeling our pain into health outflows. Each person, with God's help, should try to cope with their pain. Pain not dealt with lashes out from us causing pain for others. In many cases, fear, hate, violence, unloving behavior flow from the pains of being hurt, not loved, abused, or left out.

After Frederick Buechner had shared an upsetting, heart-rendering scene from his childhood, Howard Butt, approached Frederick and said: "You have been a good steward of your pain." "That phrase caught me absolutely off guard," Buechner testified. "You are a good steward of your pain, crystallized something. The moment was an epiphany of self-understanding. Here was a new way to understand my calling: the stewardship of pain." Frederick explains that there are at least two ways to fail to be a steward of one's pain. Like the fearful servant in the parable of the talents, one might simply bury the pain. This is a defense mechanism, an act of fear. We imagine that if we can bury the pain we can avoid pain. But we do not realize how much we are burying parts of who we are. We become alienated from ourselves, and the pain has a tendency to emerge, zombie-like, devouring. Conversely, Frederick says, "one could make a spectacle of pain, displaying pain as a way of centering attention on oneself. Neither of these responses to pain steward pain. To steward pain is to face one's own suffering for the sake of others, to be an occasion and catalyst for the reader to grapple with their own pain in ways that are restorative and redemptive."

Frederick was careful and responsible with his pain. In a sermon, Frederick said: "Many of us do not handle our pain very well. We either hide our pain or we are trapped by pain. We hide our pain when we try not to acknowledge pain, stuff pain down like pain does not really matter, and treat pain like an embarrassing skin growth that we try to keep others from seeing. The other way we are not good stewards of our pain is when we let the pain trap us. We cannot move past pain and we slowly let the pain close in on us, make us smaller, and stunt our growth. Fear, paranoia, and bitterness surround us and we are unable to learn anything from the pain and our life becomes dark and relationships suffer and God often becomes the center of our anger." Richard Rohr says that, "If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit pain." Frederick continues: "We have to be good stewards of our pain or there will be hell to pay for us individually and for those closest to us. God seems to do some of God's most effective and transforming work in our pain." Elisabeth Eliot says, "There is, in fact, no redemptive work without suffering." "Job, David, Elijah, Peter, and Paul all suffered greatly but also experienced great growth out of their pain. Job got to experience God's presence; David could walk through the valley of death and fear no evil; Elijah could hit burnout and depression and still experience the powerful whisper of God; Peter could turn his back on Jesus but still be the rock on which the church was built; and Paul could be beaten, imprisoned, and persecuted but still learn to be content in all circumstances."

Scott Jeffries wrote: "In my own life, I have suffered great loss and disappointment. I have experienced pain that has been acute and heartbreaking. Sometimes I have been a good steward of my pain and not hidden pain or let pain entrap me but other times I have operated out of bitterness and anger. Yet, God has been gracious to me. God has put people in my life to help me navigate my pain. God has reminded me of God's great presence and love. God has given me people to serve and love and care for so that I can move past my self-consumption. God has given me the great promises in scripture that I can come to God and find rest and that God will give me peace. I am starting to become a good steward of my pain. God often uses pain as a laboratory to create a new, stronger and more mature version of us. If you are suffering right now, know that God wants to redeem your pain but you cannot hide pain or get trapped in pain. You must embrace pain and turn pain over to God for healing and restoration. If you do not, the damage will only grow worse. But, if you learn to be responsible with your pain, God will create in you a resiliency and reliance on God that will not be shaken. What will you do with your pain?"

Hank Azaria recalls: "Matthew Perry took me to my first A.A. meeting. Matthew struggled and quit booze a few years before. As we walked into A.A. Matthew knew the look on my face — daunted. Beyond daunted: demoralized. Matthew looked at me and said in his half-joking, loving way: 'It is something, isn't it? God is a bunch of drunks together in a room.' At the time, I did not know what Matthew meant. I have since

learned. He meant that as bad as we feel, as low as we go, we tend to feel we are alone in pain, whether our problem is alcoholism, a bad marriage, illness, depression, strife. We feel that we are the only one who has ever gone through pain; in recovery we call it terminal uniqueness. And it is by going into a room with people sharing, saying out loud what it is that is upsetting us and hearing that from others that we feel, well, maybe we are not alone. In time we realize that the most unfortunate, terrible things we face connect us with others.”

Carrie Newcomer wrote: “We had a small water crisis at our home. The break happened within a wall, so we did not realize at first that a pipe had begun to leak. We noticed a damp floor. This was our indicator, a sign, that something deep within the wall needed our attention. A small leak can become a larger break and eventually do serious structural damage to a house. This is when a wise person stops whatever they thought they would be doing that day and shuts down the main water line to begin the messy work of repairing what is damaged. Although we still have quite a bit of dry wall repair and painting to do, the leak has been mended and the water is back on. This story is a matter of plumbing, pipes, and home repair. But there is a metaphor that came to me during this experience, and I have been thinking about how many times in my personal life I chose to not notice a slow leak or inner call to attention. I have been thinking about all the times in my life that I merely tried to push back the water, the pain, or the times when I ignored the pain and did nothing. Sometimes my attempt to push back the water, the pain, looked like overwork (the most revered addiction in our culture) or a selfless form of not taking care of myself (a revered spiritual misconception in our culture). It has also looked like a wide variety of well-honed survival techniques and distractions. But, even though there are plenty of ways to keep trying to push back the water, the pain, there comes a time when there is little left to do but open up the wall and start working on the real problem.”

We are good stewards of pain when we acknowledge pain and listen to our self and listen to others. Asking where is God? What is God doing? What is God inviting us to do or be. Where are the glimmers of light streaming from the light of the world? This listening and questioning is transformative prayer.

We are good stewards of pain when we lean into the pain, own our story, and choose how we react. Brene Brown writes: “When we deny our stories, they define us. When we own our stories, we get to write a brave new ending.”

The Swiss psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, known for her seminal work, *On Death and Dying*, makes an interesting point about those who have hit rock bottom. “The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, know pain and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

Jesus said. **Matthew 11:28-30 MSG** “**Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you will recover your life. I will show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.**”

Everyone’s pain is unique. Sometimes there is nothing one can do to lessen pain. Pain fatigues and hinders sleep. Pain amplifies other alignments and often sends one on a downward spiral. Sometimes there is nothing one can do to get through pain. God is with us in our pain. God will free us from all pain. Revelation proclaims: **Revelation 21:4 NLT** “**God will wipe every tear and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.**” God will alleviate all pain. Sometimes even the great pain warrior David prayed. **Psalm 46:10** “**Be still and know God.**” Sometimes the only thing for one to do is wait.

Sometimes we can lessen the pain and journey through pain. David is a seasoned pain guide. David was a good steward of his pain. David named and described his pain. David lamented, grieved, and mourned. David prayed, sang, and worshipped. David let go and let God transform him. David was grateful, pondered the promises of God, and hoped. David let God’s grace wash over him, cleansing him of his mistakes, guilt, and shame. David asked for help. David learned. David praised God, singing about God’s forgiveness, redemption and steadfast love. David waited. David listened to God. David rejoiced in God’s redemptive love.

David sang: **Psalm 130 MSG** “**Help, God—I have hit rock bottom! Master, hear my cry for help! Listen hard! Open your ears! Listen to my cries for mercy. If you, God, kept records on wrongdoings, who would stand a chance? As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit and that is why you are worshiped. I pray to God—my life a prayer—and wait for what God will say and do. My life is on the line before God, my Lord, waiting and watching till morning, waiting and watching till morning. O Israel, wait and watch**

for God—with God’s arrival comes love, with God’s arrival comes generous redemption. No doubt about it—God will redeem Israel, buy back Israel from captivity to sin.” Amen