

# **Prescriptions for the Soul: The Taxonomy of Despair**

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The good Reverend Harrison has convened this conference so that we might have a chance to think and to talk together about the implications of real, live, transformational mercy. The church and all of her ministries are hereby challenged mightily to consider the high and holy task that we are given as purveyors of God's own Life and Light. We are called to bring that Life and Light to a world whose darkness is staggering. The consequences of acting boldly on a theology of mercy will rescue and comfort innumerable souls throughout time and right into the anteroom of eternity. The choices that we make individually, professionally, and institutionally can, indeed, change the world – albeit one person at a time.

This afternoon I'll begin with four swift lessons regarding our impressions of others' despair; then, we'll explore the taxonomy of despair. I believe that the better we understand the devolution away from hope, the wiser and more helpful we as pastors, family and friends can be to provide comfort and care for the despairing psyche and soul.

## **The Facets of Despair**

Let's be candid, shall we? Most of us honestly believe that we know despair when we see it in the lives of others around us. After all, despairing people aren't too tough to find, right? We've come to imagine that the despairing among us stand out like sore thumbs upon our personal landscape of milk and honey: the despairing are homeless, hungry, or they live in poverty. Perhaps they've become victims of some catastrophe spawned by nature or they may have collided with a dreadful unfolding of personal life events. No sophisticated insights are required to understand despair. It is what it is. Right? Not necessarily so.

What we believe about another's despair will influence mightily how it is that we minister to and respond to the needs of the other. If we've come to believe that another's despair is really nothing more than weak-kneed self-indulgence, or if we imagine that depression is simply a failure to be an adult and to act responsibly, or if we suspect that another's distress is really some sort of drama and plea for attention there will be precious little mercy dispensed.

Occasionally we will go so far as to examine the cause of another's despair and reach a personal judgment about what we believe to be the actual severity of their situation. Based on our detailed analysis of the precipitating cause, we then estimate just how much

mercy we believe is warranted – given the nature of the problem. If we are arrogant enough, we might actually imagine, “if I were in his shoes, I could handle this.” We might conclude, “this is just not a big deal.” Perhaps it would be useful to mention that what devastates and staggers the soul and psyche of one person could leave another seemingly untouched. Despair has an infinite number of causes and faces. A few quick portraits to set the scene:

Last fall I met a fourteen year-old high school freshman boy who horribly and publicly humiliated when neither of two girls accepted his invitation to Homecoming. From our lofty perspective as those seasoned in matters of life and love, we realize that he is suffering needlessly and that he will live to dance another day. He was referred to me when his parents found him sitting in the garage sobbing, with a noose of rope about his neck and deep rope burns at his throat. This boy’s pain was viscerally real and his shame and hopelessness crippled him. We want to say, “you’re just a kid; get a grip here. If you can’t handle this how do you plan to handle something important in life?” And that, by the way, is precisely what his pastor did tell him.

Last spring I met a sixty four year old woman who couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, and had no desire or energy to engage in the life patterns she had found satisfying for decades. The woman was a respected and capable homemaker who cleaned and sewed and cooked and baked up a storm for her family. Now she won’t allow others in the house because everything is in horrible disarray. What tragedy has befallen this otherwise happy and high functioning lady? She and her husband spent a large amount of their savings to thoroughly update and renovate their kitchen and family room: new cabinets, new sinks, new flooring, a granite breakfast bar, modern window treatments and bright new wallpaper. She hates it. She hates every part of it. She can’t bear to look at it. She blames herself for wasting their savings and ruining the family home. She hasn’t cooked a meal for months. She has stopped going to her church, to Bible study and to Ladies Service League. She resigned her membership in the Altar Guild. She tells me “I don’t want to see anyone. I don’t want to explain myself to anyone.” And now this dear, gentle soul requires the ongoing care of a psychiatrist and a psychologist because she is having suicidal thoughts. She refuses to see her pastor. She assures me that there is no way he would understand any of this. Once again, we wonder, how bad can a remodeling project be – deal with it! She would, if she could. She can’t and she cries herself to sleep every night – on the nights she is able to sleep at all.

Today we will talk about despair, not as we perceive it, not with any intention to calibrate another’s pain, not with arrogant disbelief that others are troubled by things we regard as entirely manageable. Today we will talk about life crippling hurt that seals other baptized Christians into cocoons of despair, that isolates them from friends, family, life, health and love. As if that weren’t sufficiently devastating, we need to acknowledge at the outset that despair can and does pervert one’s relationship with God. Despair is Satan at work. Despair is as much spiritual warfare against the soul as it is medical combat against dysfunctional neurotransmitters. Despair results routinely in countless numbers of God’s children who cannot or will not pray, cannot or will not worship, cannot or will

not find comfort in the means of grace and who cannot or will not have any desire to talk with God's called and ordained servant about any of it.

Despair, no matter what its cause, is a cruel and grotesque distortion of life. Most of us, by the grace of God, are sufficiently resilient to endure mini set-backs, reversals, even periods of sadness and loss. Despair and deep clinical depression dwarf all of the little discouragements in life that we have known.

In sum, we have Lesson number one: Don't use your emotional yardstick to measure the depth or appropriateness of another's pain. Your false appraisal of our circumstances may prevent us from hearing you, and from hearing the Gospel. Your readiness to minimize our situation may assure us that you are not cable of understanding us. The number one reason people don't talk to their pastors is "he just doesn't get it." Your impression of our despair will trivialize our truth. When you've told us how insignificant our problem is, or when you assure us that we are overreacting to a situation - we'll not need to talk with you again.

### **When Despair is a Secret**

As helpers, we don't always have access to the truth about another's pain. Deep depression and despair are often concealed behind the proud masks of dignity, fear or sheer necessity. A Newsweek cover story several months ago reported on "a hidden epidemic of despair that is destroying marriages, disrupting careers, filling jail cells, and clogging emergency rooms." The article detailed that "six million American men will be diagnosed with depression this year." The author observed that, "millions more suffer silently, unaware that their problem has a name" or are unwilling to tell anyone about it. After all, men are notorious for not taking care of themselves and worse, not talking about what they genuinely feel. Men tend not to sit back and examine their emotional tea leaves.

The silence of despair seems to resonate with a post-modern culture that has endorsed the convention of social pretense and superficial syllable exchanges. Un-talk is embraced in lieu of communication conducted face to face with another human being. Instead we keystroke anonymously at all hours of the night on blogs venting our discontent, or we stare mesmerized at a screen of others' verbal splatterings and mistakenly conclude that we have somehow "connected" or "communicated" anything even remotely meaningful. The silently despairing can't extract anything at all satisfying, encouraging or uplifting from much of anything in their world.

Let me point with horrifying reality to the fact that in the last 37 episodes of homicidal school violence, 75% of the shooters fit this clinical profile: deeply lonely, disconnected and incapable of loving or giving love even to those closest to them. They are bereft of community that provides him with comfort or solace. One thousand homicides a year are committed by people who feel this way. Thanks be to God, that not all the despairing are homicidal. Some are quietly suicidal.

Let the record show that many of the silently despairing will lie with abandon to most anyone who inquires about our well-being. We'll lie to our spouse, our boss, our families, our friends and we'll lie to our pastors, too. The imagined stigma of having anyone learn of our depression would be humiliating. We can't bear to guess what people would say; worse, what would they think? So, if others inquire about us, we'll report, "We're just fine." Or, we'll offer the most minimalist remark that, "we've just been a little too stressed lately." We have too much to lose, too much pride and we would rather die than seek help. And some of us do. The cause of death is suicide.

Lesson number two: reality is rarely what it appears to be. Very often those who appear quietly happy and well-adjusted are neither.

### **So What Ought People Do When They Are Despairing?**

The moment that we pose such a question we've adopted the wrong model entirely. We've given credibility to the fallacy that most despairing people are capable of knowing and honoring healthy plans or intentions, even if they really wanted to. Most of the truly despairing people that I know are barely holding it together.

Merely meeting the requirements of daily living seems impossible to the despairing. What does that mean? The challenge of getting up, showering, choosing clothes and the prospect of doing anything about one's hair or make up overwhelms one's capacity. One client told me that he can barely function one hour of the day at a time. Despairing individuals are simply not going to come up with the necessary plans. Even if they stumbled upon a good idea regarding their rescue and remedy, it's unlikely they would have the personal focus and capacity to implement it.

The following is an excerpt from an e-mail that a pastor sent me recently:

"The skies finally may be turning blue outside, But inside there is a gray pall that will not lift. The stress of the week lapses into the dread of the weekend. Inconsolable, I brood and sleep, mindlessly trying to pass time. My wife spends her energies trying desperately to find anything that will spark a positive thought, or a glimmer of hope from me. I put her through the hell I am living. She does not deserve it."

He continues, "I stun myself into numbness with the internet, knowing that my pornography use would shock any sensible person. Perhaps I'm punishing myself or hoping to get caught so others can punish me. In the end hopefully I will just die so that I won't end up taking my own life."

"I'm so sad. Will this ever end? I finally mentioned some of this to my circuit counselor – he responded, "wow-bummer!" He slapped me on the back and told me, "you'll pull out of this, put on your helmet, buckle up, Lent is coming."

This man is sustained only by God's grace in these days. We are not going to rely on this individual to "do what he should" to stay healthy. For the record, he sees his psychologist once every four to six months, he is not compliant with his medications and

he hasn't sought spiritual care and counsel from a brother pastor – ever and given the response of his circuit counselor, we can guess why he's reluctant to do that.

Lesson number three: the despairing cannot formulate or implement a plan without sometimes gentle and sometimes very directive assistance. For the record, the plan for rescue and remedy should look something like this for the hurting soul: I need to talk with my spouse, seek care and counsel from my pastor, consult with my doctor, have a psychological or psychiatric assessment done, be compliant with all of the healthy recommendations given me by those who love and care about me. Above all trust that the good and loving God who created me, redeemed me, who sanctifies and keeps me in the one true faith will be faithful to His promises even in the midst of my suffering. That's the textbook plan. Yet, once the dominoes of life begin to capsize the only goal seems to be hanging in and hanging on.

### **Despair as a Symptom of Sin**

Perhaps the churchly plan is to simply regard all this despair as sin– perhaps that's what people should do? And since we have an army of called and ordained servants out there, we can take this on. We would be naïve to imagine that sin is not at the root of dysfunction. Sin sustains despair and it prevents healthy responses to pain.

An Episcopalian priest speaking on spirituality and psychotherapy made the stinging indictment that it's a good thing that the medieval notions of sin are dead. He went on to say, "Maybe that's not all that bad." He observed that if people really believed that they were sinners, they would be more depressed that they already are.

Sadly, the priest was wrong about a lot of things. In addition to everything else, he was surely wrong about sin. Not only is it NOT dead, it is thriving. Further, and quite candidly, sin doesn't depress us, it delights us. Sin gives us comfort. We take comfort in excesses: alcohol, drugs, pornography, extra-marital relationships. Sin gives us a perception of taking action, soothing ourselves and finding distraction, if not relief. Sin comforts us with the idolatrous mantra, "I can handle, this. I can manage this. I can find my way through this." Our lust for control and comfort transforms us into our own little gods, whose primary purpose is to meet our own needs and to care for ourselves (however poorly) on a moment-to-moment and day-to-day-basis. For individuals who have a hole in their lives, it is often sin that fills the vacuum.

Is a 30 year old unbearably lonely? Nothing like a live-in relationship with a caring and available other to stop the pain.

Is a 20 year old marriage increasingly demoralizing and empty? Divorce is a certain remedy and will end one kind of suffering – only to invite suffering of a new and unimagined sort.

When we are in pain, we've come to believe that we need our sin to survive, when in fact our sin is actually killing us. We also know that our sin can swamp us in shame that separates us from seeking pastoral care and counsel. Given our understanding of the

theology of the cross, we are to be obedient and endure suffering instead of choosing to end suffering in a fashion incompatible with God's will.

What could violate human expectations more profoundly? Only losers choose to suffer. Only losers give up immediate well-being in exchange for some iffy return on investment payable at death. Christians call that "eternal life." (Have you noticed that most of the comfort of the Christian faith appears to be payable at death – at least as many preachers tell the story? We'll come to that later.) If we are asking people to endure suffering instead of choosing sin, we had better ensure that they are entirely equipped for the task.

Our Lord would have us find comfort in Jesus who is our rest. By His grace He would have us speak the truth of our sin before Him and have us hear His absolution spoken by our pastor. He would have us revel in His Word and receive His Holy Sacrament, by which means He forgives our sins, giving us new life and salvation. He would have us enter into His presence with every uncertainty, fear, calamity and disquietude of heart and soul, inviting us to surrender the magnitude of our weaknesses, pouring out our empty idolatries so that He can fill us up with every good gift which can come only from Him. And that is sufficient grace for each moment; and that is enough. He surrounds us with His hope and His peace. As a result, we cling to His sure promises in this moment and for every moment between now and eternity. Right?

Sure. That's just what Scripture teaches. That's precisely what God's own Spirit has called, gathered and enlightened us to believe. Right? Certainly.

Yet we would be naïve to imagine that temptation is not ever present and real. Os Guinness in his book Unspeakable Evil: Facing Up the Challenge of Evil comments, "Suffering poses the supreme challenge to whatever faith we have and offers the supreme temptation to despair.. it plunges us into an experiences that rips the skin off our normal feelings . . . and brutally locks out any prospect of remedy. The devastation can be so total, the senseless irrationality so complete, the impossibility of a way out so bleak and the combined tensions of all of the conflicts so unbearable, that is seems the only way out is to quit, and the only relief is to give up and despair."

Lesson number four: and the key spiritual issue that we have to acknowledge in the face of roaring despair is that sin can effectively insulate us from the healing power of the Gospel. Despair, after all can be defined as separation from God in this moment – whether it is real or imagined, it is still regarded as hellacious. Sin, in concert with mental illness and despair, can create what often appears to be an impenetrable barrier to hearing and taking possession of Gospel realities and gifts. And that invites our undivided attention if we to be ambassadors of mercy. The antidote to despair is hope. How do we provide hope, if others are captive to the despair of mental illness?

### A Taxonomy of Despair

Despair is really a solitary odyssey of sorts, usually unprecedented in one's previous experience. An individual is swept away on this journey with no time to plan for it and no clue as to what actually one can expect along the way.

Once one falls captive to notable hardship, there may actually be some common denominators, or layers through which individuals may pass enroute to hopelessness. Some cautionary notes are essential at the outset. Any effort to characterize human despair will err because no single paradigm will ever reflect accurately the complexity and diversity of every person's experience. The taxonomy I'll offer for your review is as uncertain and imprecise as any blueprint that attempts to generalize information across all situations. Yet, I believe it is remarkably useful to be able to detail what the unfolding experience of despair MAY be like for MANY people. The purpose, of course, is to assist us in providing pastoral care and helping responses that actually do help.

You'll not find this categorical system of hopelessness detailed in an American Psychiatric Association publications, largely because the APA really doesn't care a whole awful lot about Christian responses to despair. You'll not find these layers of hopelessness detailed in many pastoral theology texts either -- because very often such texts recommends responding to the resistant or reluctant soul that is depressed in a one-size-fits-all way. Some of the more sensitive pastoral theology texts on soul care, for example, Thomas Oden's work, Classical Pastoral Care, or Paul Pruyser's book, The Minister as Diagnostician encourage pastors to be deeply sensitive to the human condition of the soul to which he ministers so that he might most capably hear, understand and address the spiritual needs of the person. Or, in the language of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, so that one can more readily "facilitate an encounter with Jesus Christ."

A caveat at the outset is that any of the phases, or layers of despair we'll be speaking about may last for days, weeks or even for years. One may race through the stages at a blinding speed and swiftly arrive at what appears to be almost impulsive self-destruction. Or, one can remain plateaued at one of these stages indefinitely, never improving, never worsening. One can move from hope to hopelessness in a moment, or across decades of time

Please keep in mind that in this discussion we are talking about God's baptized and traumatized children who are becoming, or who are already resistant to reading or hearing the Word, who are reluctant to receive the Sacrament and who are resistant to receiving pastoral care. We are not talking about Grandma Schmitt who loves to have her pastor visit and who receives with thanksgiving the gifts that the pastor brings to her bedside.

### **The Emotional Tsunami**

Despair surely has some sort of precipitant, precursor or cause. For the people who appear most damaged, there has been an emotional tsunami of sorts. I'd like you to think back to some of the most ghastly pictures you can recall of the tsunamis that flattened Samoa, Indonesia, Thailand and parts of Southeast Asia. I recall one heart breaking picture of a little girl nearly naked, clinging to the remnant of a tree as water tore past her, sweeping everything that used to be her home and family away.

Emotional tsunamis aren't always that public but they are, nevertheless, intensely damaging events, or circumstances that rip away everything that one had once trusted, needed, wanted, accomplished or believed about self or others. People and things that were once loved and familiar are threatened or gone or inaccessible. There appears to be nothing but destruction, devastation and the smallest reminders and remnants of life as one used to know it. The emotional consequence of any tsunami is the certain realization, "things will never be the same." There is an awareness of deep and abiding loss of self, possessions, reality as one had once known it.

Emotional tsunamis may take the form of financial ruin, infidelity, the death of a child, of a spouse, of a parent, public humiliation or losses, or changes that suffocate the desire to go on. A tsunami results in mental paralysis accompanied often by acute emotional and spiritual pain.

Now, the theologians among us will sit up perceptively and be prepared to explain in great detail the distinctly Lutheran theodicy that helps us, in some small way, to wrap our minds around the impossible. Theodicy, of course, is simply about trying to explain the ways of God to man – particularly, trying to offer some sense that God is reasonable, loving and just, even in the face of suffering.

Pastors may want to rush in and assure the bereft one, God loves you! There is a reason for all of this. Let me help acquaint you with the theology of the cross so that you can see with clarity the deep and comforting truth in the throes of all this suffering. The theology of the cross is a treasure of our church, a source of comfort and consolation for those who suffer.

In fact, we might want to quote some particularly moving passages from Luther's 1530 sermon on Cross and Suffering such as: "every Christian must be aware that suffering will not fail to come.... Luther would have us know, " that Christ by his suffering not only saved us from the devil, death and sin, but also that his suffering is an example which we are to following in our suffering." Yes. Each of us here nods wisely, "this is most certainly true." We might even want to add Luther's observation that "through the suffering of Christ, the suffering of all his saints has become utterly holy, for it has been touched with Christ's suffering. Therefore we should accept all suffering as a holy thing."

Pastors with a reflex need to teach the theology of the cross in the midst of another's tsunami ordinarily point to the fact that the despairing soul is sobbing, "why has this happened to me?" The pastor simply wants to offer the answer to that penetrating question. Just as in life, in catastrophe, some questions are rhetorical. Sometimes the sobbing question of the victim is an angry, wailing reflex, and clearly not a request for a detailed tutorial at all.

In the face of a tsunami, the last thing that anyone wants is a lesson. The last thing for which anyone has any patience is to listen to someone else when your life appears to be oozing out of your pores. The emotional tsunami victim cannot tolerate teaching and

talking; he has probably shut down completely, he may be entirely overwhelmed, and is barely capable of thinking. He may well be non-responsive and appear to be in something akin to an altered state.

Ecclesiastes 3 gets it right: there is a time for everything. In fact, in verse 7, we specifically hear that there is a time to be silent and a time to speak. Be silent. Please. Don't lecture. Don't recite your favorite Bible verses. Don't presume to know what the spirit and psyche of this person can tolerate. Be silent. Start by listening, then listen some more and then if there is nothing for you to listen to pray and keep vigil with your brother in the body of Christ. Surely be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you.....when the time is right.

When you listen, you will be establishing a presence of comfort and compassion. These are gifts that are received most easily in the most difficult moments. One pastor, called to respond to a congregant's car accident and pending death prayed the Lord's Prayer, then asked if the family had any questions or anything they wanted to know. Hearing none, and having completed at least a 10-minute visit, he spun on his heel, checked his cell phone and said, "Well if you need me, give me a call." He hadn't learned how to listen. He had said all that he could think of to say, and he left. His "job," or so he thought, was to say things and to be a theology expert and to answer questions. He hadn't learned how to keep vigil and he missed an opportunity to witness to the hope that was in him, when the family was ready to hear it.

Any one who has received training in trauma counseling or who has worked with post traumatic stress victims learns quickly that the most immediate help is presence: so that one is not solitary, isolated, helpless, alone – and then, even more powerful, listening. The number one function of many trauma counselors is to assist the emotionally, physically and spiritually wounded to tell their story; to speak their heart without interruption. To rant, rail, sob, scream or whisper their story. For to begin to speak means that they are continuing to connect. To begin to speak is to begin to make some sense of something desperately awful. To speak is to be able to act on the world long enough for the world to stop acting upon you. To speak is to make words about something horrible, preventing you from denying the reality of the moment. To speak requires someone to listen. One student, a survivor of the Virginia Tech slaughter told a Newsweek reporter, "just taking to you really helped – or I think I would have lost my mind completely."

Most pastors want TO DO something. One man told me, I don't buy this silence and listening line. I was called to teach and to preach. And many pastors rush in, sporting the best intentions and the finest desire to serve and they tell the suffering, "this will pass." Or they tell the wounded, "This may seem worse than it really is." Perhaps they say, "here are some Bible verses that have always given me comfort in adversity." These are the pastors that my clients tell me "don't get it." These are the pastors who may never have experienced a single day of distress in their lives and as a result blunder horribly when souls need them desperately.

Keeping vigil, it seems to me is vastly underrated. Recall the earnest request of our Lord at Gethsemane. He asked his disciples, “Sit here while I pray...and when he found Peter sleeping, Jesus asked, “Could you not keep watch for one hour?” Jesus did not require a guard to protect him from Judas and the crowd. He invited his disciples to keep vigil, to be prayerful to stand with him at a time his soul was “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.”

A powerful contemporary illustration is given us by Gregory Schulz, a Wisconsin Synod pastor. He wrote a wonderful book: The Problem of Suffering: A Father’s Thoughts on the Suffering, Death and Life of His Children. Schulz writes about the death of his infant daughter after months of sitting helplessly and watching her suffering. He offers this striking comment on *page one* of his book: “To be honest with you, there have been months when the LAST thing I wanted was to be anywhere near the Lord my God, much less to listen for a logical explanation of the agony wracking the little soul being held on my lap.”

As a pastor he was surely well acquainted with Luther’s Explanation of Psalm 6: “That in all trials and affliction man should first of all run to God; he should realize and accept the fact that everything is sent by God, whether it comes from the devil or from man. God’s permissive will is still God’s will.”

Schulz captures brilliantly the numbness and the spiritual shutdown that accompanies the tsunami: “Let me tell you what you can expect to run into if God brings great suffering into your life. Expect a barrier around us suffering and grieving people where talk about God’s incarnational presence and love seem irrelevant. These articles of the faith are relevant, of course. Very relevant, but they SEEM useless. Looking down on your daughter’s coffin, everything seems useless. And for far longer than you may imagine.”(p. 42)

You will surely want to wrap these suffering souls in prayer, but at the moment when the tsunami first hits, be there to bear witness to the pain and to the truth, tearing away the cocoon of isolation, sharing the pain and being a small but certain Light that can barely be perceived in the vast emotional and spiritual darkness. So what response is vital and appropriate?

At the close of Tsunami visits, offer a prayer and offer a blessing. Bring the power of God to bear. Confer upon this poor suffering soul everything God has promised by offering blessing, for you can offer God’s people in blessing everything that God has given His church. And, let me be clear, I don’t mean a whispered *gesundheit*. I mean a ritual blessing where your hands are placed on the head of the supplicant, if he’ll allow it. Where you trace the most holy cross of Christ on the forehead of the sufferer and where you bring God’s gifts to His baptized child. Whether or not your blessing is heard, understood, or appreciated is not the matter. The blessing is pronounced and the ritual act of blessing God’s people creates spiritual realities required by the suffering soul. The goal at this level of personal and pastoral response is to break through the suffering, to be a presence, to hear the story, if another is capable of speaking it; and to ensure that the

soul is not alone and to finally ensure that the soul has been entrusted God's protective care.

### **Insulation**

The paralysis of the emotional tsunami will pass and a new day will, indeed, dawn. The next layer of despair may bring denial – I prefer to call this insulation from the intrusion of reality. It may last briefly or for quite awhile. Insulation is a retreat from nearly everything dealing with the incident, it is an inability to engage with details. One tears oneself away from the pain a little bit at a time, trying to return to the normal functions of life. After an emotional tsunami one simply endures as best as one can. If one is trying to insulate from the pain, how welcome do you imagine is the visit of the friend or pastor who is probing, prodding, revisiting and replaying the details of the tsunami at will? Once again care, counsel and ministry begins with listening.

Somewhere, as this layer of insulation unfolds, there will be a moment. It is a precious window into which even a small light may dispel later and even deeper darkness. It is a moment that most suffering individuals see as deeply humiliating and desperate all at once. It is a moment when the pain penetrates the insulation and the denial. The moment emerges when the soul hits absolute bottom, recognizing it has no resources of its own. In that moment the despairing soul surrenders, understanding that neither self-reliance nor a steely personal resolve can provide rescue or comfort. The soul surrenders to reality as well as it is able and reality often invites mayhem. In that moment the soul may cry out, "Help me. I can't do this. I can't stand this. I can't take this." In that moment one moves into helplessness.

### **Helplessness**

The cry may be whimpered or screamed in rage. One may scream at God, at one's spouse or physician. The plaintive cries continue and there are no resolutions. The absence of any real, life altering help seems to confirm that things are as dire as one imagined them to be. Very often the angry will welcome the opportunity to unload all of their hurt and anger onto God, confident that He hears and helps. The Psalms of Lament are particularly helpful in this regard and are often well received by many.

Dr. John Kleinig, from the Lutheran Seminary in Adelaide, Australia teaches us that in reading the Psalms of Lament, we help the suffering ones to bring their pain into the open and to tell God what it is that their enemies have done. We are invited by God to tell Him how we have been hurt and to insist that we want justice done. There is very often great healing available in being able to let the feeling or desire for revenge to come out into the open and give it to God. Then, trust that God will do what is right, when it is right, thereby allowing one to surrender all of it to him. Select one of the Psalms of Lament and read it with the hurting soul, or simply suggest one that you believe he or she may find helpful. (The Psalms of Lament include: 6, 13, 22, 35, 40, 55, 56, 59, 64, 69, 86, 88, 140 and 143)

Instead of pointing to God's Word, some of the help offered at this time of reaching out is remarkably well-intentioned but inept. Friends may tell you their stories of loss and

sadness to help provide the despairing with "perspective." Let's make clear that is NOT helpful. This is NOT about you. The despairing is likely to be surrounded by many family and friends who fill his ears with platitudes and ineptitudes. One man, thirty years after his mother's early and tragic death, remains appalled by the callousness of those who tried to comfort him, "How nice she looks in the coffin. The undertaker did a nice job on my mom, too" She's dead. "How nice she didn't suffer." She's only 51 years old. When we open our doors and risk asking for help, we may well reel in disbelief regarding how out of touch people are about pain.

We learn pretty quickly that asking for help is not all that it's cracked up to be, for no one seems to be very helpful. All we need to do is to recall just how helpful all of Job's friends were in the midst of his travail. Sadly, very often those who want to provide help really do make things worse and prompt people to withdraw, to return to the insulating cocoon of avoidance and denial and seal themselves away from others whose insensitivity seems to only make things worse.

The cry for help is genuine and shame filled. Our culture teaches that we are supposed to be able to handle everything, suck it up and deal with whatever life tosses in our direction. To have to ask for help, to be incapable of managing one's life is humiliating and feels like a personal failure. When hearing helplessness, the Christian helper will want to affirm the individual in their helplessness. We do NOT want to say, "No, you **can** handle this." "Don't say that, you're not helpless, you're going to be able to do everything you need to."

Don't contradict what is spiritually and emotionally true. Instead, affirm their wisdom in speaking the truth before God. "Yes, this is a time when you sound as though you are almost completely depleted." "Yes, you sound as though you have fought as hard as you can for as long as you can and you are nearly numb with all of it." Words like "depletion" and "numb" begin to provide language for what the helpless have been, or will be experiencing. It is very useful to provide some vocabulary words to help them begin to make some sense of any of it. Often people will look at me as though I've come upon a great discovery, and they seize the use of those words in beginning to describe themselves. They express great comfort in just being understood.

Helplessness doesn't require fixing. Helplessness requires hope. Hope is the single most powerful commodity given us. Hope allows for us to imagine that this horrible feeling, event, time in our life may change in some small way that will allow for us to tolerate life ... for just another hour....or for just another day. Hope needs to be dispensed in very small parcels in the presence of the helpless. We have no respect for the wildly unrealistic reassurances, "you're going to be just fine." We will be able to hear with great clarity phrases such as:

You have endured so very much already, God will continue to provide you with everything that you will require – one moment at a time.

The subscript offered to the helpless one is: you need not rely on yourself any longer. This is the best of first commandment theology in a plain brown wrapper. You're pointing to their pain and making clear that it is God who has worked in them and through them and in spite of them. Perhaps they can come to hope that if God has sustained them through the worst of the tsunami, He might indeed sustain them another night, and then another day beyond that. You are relieving them of the idolatry of self-reliance and pointing to a loving God, albeit in an indirect way.

If, instead, you chose to tell them how loving God is, there can be surprising sarcasm or anger, "Yeah, he loves me a lot. He loves me so much he just let the mother of my three children die." We can offer hope to the helpless by talking about their struggle and pointing to the role of God in preserving them.

We also need to address the deep feelings of real and imagined guilt harbored by the helpless. They may or may not be able to put their guilt into words. So once again, the helper offers the gift of words.

"You have done everything you can as God gives you light. That's all that you can do in this moment. And if you have done anything that you regret.....is there anything?" And if the helpless soul can sputter any form of confession, seize the moment and offer God's powerful absolution right on the spot, pointing to the forgiveness of sins and the NEW Life given abundantly right then. And speak of God's strong presence to preserve and protect him from all things in accordance with God's will. For people in the market for a miracle, God's Holy Absolution is precisely what the physician of the soul offers: the miracle of life in exchange for death; the surrender of sin and the gift of holiness.

Once absolved, questions may persist. Here we're addressing the wildfire of guilty feelings that remain even after absolution is given. Guilty feels are fueled by the questions: What if I hadn't done that? What should I have done? What could I have done? What if I had thought to do this/say that? You are removing a lifetime of dueling with real and imaginary guilty feelings by facilitating an important conversation at this time. You tell them, "I'm going to guess that you've done all that you can, as God gives you light." Most people will be able to agree that they really did do everything they could.

We need to point that out, as it may lighten the burden. Kubler-Ross used to tell physicians the following story: if a family has kept grandma at home and in bed for the last five hours and then just rushed her to the ER only to have her die in the car.....Kubler-Ross advised that the family must hear from the physician "you've done the very best you can and made the very best decisions you could to love and serve grandma." Kubler-Ross believed that even with the absence of any Christian affirmation, countless people could be spared the torture of unnecessary guilt. She obviously didn't recommend that the ER doc say, "Well, you know...if you had dialed 911 four hours ago, and grandma had been transported to the hospital on oxygen support and given an nitroglycerin tab – she just might have made it to see another day." Instead the family hears the truth: "you've done the very best you can."

Speak the truth in love. They need to hear, “The truth is you can find in gifts of Christ’s own Spirit everything that you will require to continue living for the next hour/day. You can’t create these things for yourself, dredging them up out of some bizarre sense of character, but you can receive from God the gifts needed to navigate through the storm.”

We have come to realize that the layer of helplessness is replete with emotional chaos. As one dares to reach out in search of hope, there is a whirlwind of questions. Most of the questions have no answers. Once the tsunami has passed, individuals have a slice of time when they may actually be ready to hear some limited conversations about: Why me? Why now? Why this? What have I done to deserve this?

These are the questions to which people wake in the bleakness of night and the questions that hound them in the quiet moments of the day. When we don’t have good answers, we concoct explanations for ourselves. Most of our explanations are self-critical, unforgiving and out of touch with reality. We’ll begin to believe lies, given us by Satan himself. We’ll suspect that our church attendance or our prayer life has caused the death of our child or spouse. We’ll invent myths to explain the tragedy in our lives, perhaps the most common being, “I have insufficient faith.” If my faith were stronger God would not have allowed this. A surprisingly large number of Lutheran Christians, in the face of compelling tragedy arrive at the conclusion that they have not done what is required for them to receive God’s help or blessing. Now there’s a formula for hopelessness. I’ve had quite a few clients tell me that “if I had the faith of a mustard seed I could move mountains.” After the death of a daughter to breast cancer, one woman told me I prayed over and over that God would save my daughter. Now I can barely function, I’m a hypocrite, my faith is insufficient.

How did this woman’s non-denominational evangelical pastor respond? He gave her the James 1: 6-7 verse regarding the supplicant in prayer:

“But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord.”

These are the moments when I wonder if we shouldn’t have some sort of pastoral malpractice suits for people who are just remarkably thick. Who have no capacity whatsoever to hear the soul, let alone to care for it. Can you say “YIKES” in a formal paper?

Obviously, gentle teaching is reassurance in this matter. We know that the soul is ready to hear the answer because the lies have been spoken and are seeking truth. We point the hurting heart to what it knows – not to a 15 page essay by Sasse. We ask, “do you remember the phrase, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him.” There’s the truth. Faith is gift. Faith is received. Measuring one’s faith and faithfulness is not God’s merit badge system of distributing blessing. Even when we’re in pain, we cling to our narcissism, always looking at God

through the warped prism of our wants, needs and helplessness. Gentle teaching assists the wounded soul to look at God through the fullness of His word.

Believe it or not, people look up through tears, wanting to hear and to believe this. Wanting to imagine for just a moment that this is true. So we point them to the fabulous explanations from Luther's Large Catechism – Kind of like the sequel to the Small Catechism, only bigger, better, more exciting. Here we find, "Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe on Him, and have Him for our Lord, unless it were offered to us and granted to our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel."

Tragedy is not the result of insufficient faith or merit. Pain is not the result of being unloved by God. Yes, here is where we tiptoe gently into the theology of the cross. The helpless are not quite ready to hear that suffering is a good thing from the perspective of sanctification and sharing in the sufferings of Christ. They are, though, prepared to identify with Paul.

The Apostle Paul prayed three times that a thorn be removed from his flesh. God's answers were "no," "no" and "no." The apostle whom God entrusted with the preaching and teaching and healing ministry of the early church couldn't seem to get God to do what he wanted done. He wanted healing. Perhaps you're not that different from the Apostle Paul – and God loved Him dearly. God has not promised to rescue us in the way that we have requested. He has, though, promised to be faithful.

This is hope. Hope that God has not abandoned, forsaken nor rejected them or their beloved. We are trusting God to be faithful. We are trusting that His wisdom and His ways are higher than ours. That's why we all pray the prayer he taught us.

Again, you're pointing to something familiar: something that the individual has prayed with comfort and confidence all of his life. We ask the despairing soul, "Remember the part of the Lord's prayer where the petition says, "Thy will be done."

That's what hope looks like. That God would keep us in His perfect will. Luther explains this petition by saying, "Grant that we may bear with patience and overcome whatever is to be endured because of Your Word and kingdom."

Don't be surprised if your teaching and counsel is greeted with tears. Tears can be the sign of the deeply damaged soul, stirred by God's own Spirit. Don't be dismayed if there is church reluctance or resistance. Some people who desperately want to take possession of God's promises routinely report that church is just too hard. They hear all the promises of God announced, sung and prayed and often people will just dissolve in sobs because it hurts too much. They are surrounded by their brothers and sisters in Christ who seem perfectly happy. Worse, they often don't FEEL comforted, and they can't DETECT God's help. As a result, they aren't confident that the small hope they do feel can last.

It's not unusual during these episodes of helplessness to believe firmly that nothing much matters any longer. Very often, people will tell you I just don't care....about church, about my job, about fertilizing the lawn. I can barely feel anything. In an effort to feel something, or with a need to be distracted from the pain, we're not surprised to see this as a time when temptations may flourish. Satan delights in the soul that can't detect God's help. For when one can't detect God's help, one makes private plans to help oneself. Occasionally, all of the emotional agitation, discontent, and malaise can be channeled into alcohol dependence or drug abuse. Others surrender to addictions: food, gambling, pornography or workaholism in lieu of life. Some just marinate in anger and irritability with hair trigger sensitivities to many of the routine rhythms of life and family. One drifts away from the people and the things that were healthy and drifts towards what is believed to be satisfying, or towards something that allows them to think that by virtue of their actions life just might be different, or better.

### **Hope Does Punctuate the Helplessness**

Helplessness can be a stage that lasts for a very long time. Witness the cry of the Psalmist in Psalm 13: "How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? This is the layer of despair that will allow the greatest opportunity for gentle teaching, prayer, blessing and absolution of spoken sins. It is the time when people may find comfort and hope in the hymnody of the church and in Scripture pointing to God's love and promises. Luther taught repeatedly that the consolation of God comes through the Word of God:

Therefore, do not let any terror overwhelm and subdue you...Take comfort in this, that you have a God, that you know Him, and that you can rely on His presence and aid, as He has guaranteed to you in His Word. There he has promised that He will surely never fail you." It is a time when people will want to receive the Holy Sacrament because you have reminded them of its consolation. Luther teaches, "If you are burdened and feel your weakness, go joyfully to the sacrament and let yourself be refreshed, comfort and strengthened. This sacrament is of little benefit to those bereft of 'misfortune, anxiety or who otherwise do not sense their adversity. For it is given only to those who need strength and comfort."

In the moments of helplessness, people may be willing to reach out, quiet their turmoil long enough to determine if they will be able to take possession of hope. You may be instrumental in sustaining their hope: again and again and yet again. A pastor is uniquely equipped to connect the despairing to the promises of God, in Christ. By the grace of God, a pastor preaches the Gospel to an individual's unique needs, fears, and history of devastation, translating tragedy into hope

Providing hope is an ongoing process. It is not a singular chat. Providing hope is at the epi-center of spiritual care. Therefore, it is an ongoing solicitation of conversations with the person in need. Please don't wait for them to ask. Please don't expect them to call. You have no idea how impossible it is for the despairing person to make requests of anyone when he or she has so little energy for anything. Invite conversation. Write a card, if you're a friend. Write a brief and deeply encouraging pastoral letter, if you are a

pastor. Some individuals will carry with them selected paragraphs because the pastor was kind enough to address their specific pain in soothing language that pointed them to hope in God through Christ.

The days of helplessness and hope are also the right moments to acknowledge that there are spiritual *and* emotional components required for healing. The soul perched precariously on top of the wall of helplessness can crash swiftly. This is the time to make a referral to a skilled counselor in whom you have confidence. This is not the time to try to make the acquaintance of someone who can treat despairing people within the framework of a Christian world view. The moral of this story is that if you don't know of someone like that, you will need to know of someone like this at some time. Begin now to cultivate a relationship with a counselor whom you know and trust.

Offer to make the phone call to the doctor. Offer to go with the individual to the doctor's office. Do everything humanly possible to make that visit happen by explaining that God will work powerfully through many to bring help and healing. You're not going to make false promises. One man had told his parishioner, "we'll get you hooked up with a shrink and you'll be feeling great in no time at all." Might I suggest that instead, you offer something like this to the despairing person, "you've been able to profit a great deal from our conversations and I'd like you to have every possible opportunity to take advantage of whatever else can contribute to helping in these days. Would you be willing to see a counselor/doctor just to get an evaluation about what he or she would recommend? I'd be happy to help with that in any way that I can." We'll trust the doctor to talk candidly about medication or whatever treatment may be useful. Your goal is to point in the right direction and to affirm that decision as healthy and appropriate.

Bear in mind that no matter what you do, say or suggest, hope may last only moments beyond your conversation, or perhaps for days or weeks at a time. When the despairing soul cannot or will not take possession of hope, there is a precipitous and often dangerous decline and disconnection from helpers and pastors alike.

### **Depletion**

Depletion heralds great danger. For depletion suggests that an individual is entirely overwhelmed by most things. Everything is too hard. Following the tumult that surely comes as one cycles through helplessness and hope, one feels as though he or she has been through an incredible battle. The weariness that attends these days nearly defies description. One might, to others, appear to be zoned out, unplugged. It is as though one, will, and one's resilience has departed as surely as air escaping from a punctured balloon. There just is simply nothing left. The ability to think with any clarity, or for any extended interval of time is gone. One can sit and stare blankly for hours at a time at a page, at a television or even stare into space without thinking a single thought. The ability to problem-solve, make decisions or reflect on one's own behavior or intentions is almost nearly absent. Depletion is often characterized by an inability to tolerate the presence or the prattle of another human being. Those in depletion cultivate avoidance as the primary goal. The prospect of listening to another human being, or worse, having to explain one's self to anyone else is nearly impossible. One woman told me she was so

ashamed of herself because she felt that if anyone said anything to her, she would either sob or scream. She would not, however listen or talk.

Depletion translates as silence; take no calls, make no calls. One can't remember what it may have meant to have fun, to look forward to something; one simply survives, one hour at a time. If there are going to be any reversals at this stage, ordinarily medical and psychological interventions will need to begin or will need to be sustained.

You would be right to assume that providing any kind of spiritual care or counsel for one who is depressed is essential. You would be equally wise to imagine that the care or counsel may not be welcome, may in fact be resisted entirely or refused. Pastoral care for the depleted is reassurance, hope, care, prayer and blessing. You will not argue someone out of this vice grip. You will not winsomely persuade the depleted that they simply need to believe, trust, have faith. As Lutheran Christians we trust that God's own Spirit will bring the life-giving gifts to the baptized faithful. Working with the depleted heart often seems as much a challenge to the soul and faith of the caregiver, as it is for the wounded. Trust that God will do what He will to bring help and healing in accordance with His will for this soul in grave danger and distress.

Depletion, although horrid in every way still allows some to function at work in a limited way before coming home to collapse and dissolve. Any participation in work or family is evidence of a brave battle to survive. If one cannot take possession of hope, one will most certainly descend to the depths of Self-Loathing and Escape.

### **Self-Loathing and Escape**

In the event you've not known this level of despair, it sounds like this: I hate myself. I hate my life. I wish that I were dead. You'd be astonished to hear a perfectly capable and gifted professional woman sob out those words. You'd look at her skills, her education, her loving family, her financial security and you'd want to say. "How can you possibly think these things?"

Self-loathing signals that an individual has few, if any, healthy coping skills or resources available. One can't hate oneself if he sees clearly that he is loved by God and loved by others. One can't hate oneself if one can see reality with any clarity at all. The person who is making these kinds of statements is out of relationship with God and usually out of relationship with spouse and family as well. She is disconnected from nearly everything that gives any meaning to life and she has become incapable of feeling joy or knowing hope. This is a person who sees hope as one more reason to expect that she will be disappointed yet again. This is a person who is in grave physical and spiritual peril.

Often, individuals who are in freefall will tell no one of their pain. They will risk hiding it all, bearing up with an incredibly false front for others to see. If another lets you see the depth of his or her self-loathing, I've come to believe that it is one of the few and final cries for help that you may detect.

This person will be very hard to minister to, if he or she will allow you to see them, at all. Pray with them, tell them you are praying for them. E-mail them. Leave encouraging phone messages. Not very many people reach out to people who feel unlovable. People who exist in this level of pain know that they are fragile. They think daily about suicide and such thoughts don't frighten them, those thoughts give them comfort. They see that there is a clear and certain means of escape.

We want these individuals to hear that we have a powerful and loving God. We want them to know that our God is so powerful and capable of doing stunning things that He can raise people from the dead. If we have a God who can raise people from the dead, He can, if you will allow Him, provide support, help and comfort. It is never too late to surrender to His love and relinquish our will to His. Yet, these words are very hard to hear, especially when one has not heard the Word preached faithfully and one finds it difficult if not impossible to receive the Sacrament, one's heart can harden. One can, in the midst of captivity to mental illness, become a prodigal of the worst sort: one who does not return to the Father's house before ending his or her own life.

We can't begin to discuss the nearly countless facets of suicidality – we'll reserve that for another day. I'll simply say that we cannot presume that there is one paradigm for suicidal thinking or behavior. I will, however, comment that suicidal thinking often accompanies the first wave of the emotional tsunami, and the suicidal thoughts become more familiar, more frequent, and less alarming to the person who experiences them. One of my clients who was desperately suicidal told me that the only comfort she knew was the comfort of realizing that when she chose to; when she could no longer bear the pain she could make the pain stop by stopping her life. She didn't really know what single event, bit of news or stress would push her across the line from life to death, she did know that she was very, very close to crossing that line...and she was relieved, not frightened by the proximity to "the end." We can't be surprised, delusional thinking is not clear thinking. Obsessive thinking is not rational thinking. She found comfort in the Romans 8 verse, "Nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

I will recommend that you consider what you will answer when the suicidal soul asks you whether or not one who suicides is able to participate in the promise of eternal life. Don't be caught wanting. When you are caring for a suicidal soul you will not have the opportunity to consider the question and contemplate an answer. Think about it now, check out a few commentaries, talk now with the brothers in your circuit about it. Expect that the question exists, whether it is asked or not. And know that the aching heart will pause to hear every syllable of your answer. We haven't the time today to discuss it fully here. I will recommend that you take the question back with you to your Bible study classes and you winkles and talk about it there

In these most difficult moments, we are called to speak the truth in love. We are called to affirm life and to keep vigil with the suffering heart. We must hold them up in prayer when we are with them and we must pray without ceasing that God would provide hope for a heart that chooses to resign from life itself. We are also responsible for doing all

that we reasonably can to ensure the safety of another whom we believe is dangerous to self.

A simple referral to a physician or doctor is inadequate when one is actively suicidal. If you cannot be confident, at the close of your conversation with this soul, that he or she is safe, then you are mandated to report so that this person can receive the intensive caring that is required to preserve his life at a time you cannot do so. That, by the way, is the ultimate litmus test. If you are worried about the safety of that person when you put your head on the pillow at night, you have failed to protect someone who can no longer protect himself. When in doubt, report. I'd prefer you have someone good and hopping mad at you as opposed to having a funeral service on your list of things to do. Individuals will be placed in protective custody where they can receive speedy evaluation and medical care that may be essential to moving them through and beyond whatever plateau of pain they may have inhabited previously.

### **Confidence in our Lord's Faithfulness**

So much to talk about. So little time. Pastors you have the blood bought gifts of Christ to give those who despair. You have Scripture, the holy Sacrament, hymns, gentle teaching, blessing, prayer, absolution and the gifts of keeping vigil and listening to offer. Serve without ceasing. The living Christ is present to save in His Holy Word and Sacrament. God will comfort His children and provide them with His very own consolation through you. And allow yourself to be comforted by the fact that God does indeed use you powerfully, no matter what your frailties or insufficiencies may be. Be bold in bringing God's own mercy to the despairing. Family and friends you have love to give and support and encouragement, and listening and prayers and Scripture truths, as well.

And our good and loving God equips us thoroughly for the acts of mercy He sets before us to do. Luther tells us that once we have been comforted by the Sacrament, we should then minister to others, he writes: When you have partaken of this sacrament...you must in turn share the misfortunes of the fellowship...Here your heart must go out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given you, you must in turn render love and support to Christ in his needy ones. You must fight, work, pray, and if you cannot do more, then have heart-felt sympathy.

We end where we began, with thanksgiving and praise: St. Paul points to both our joy and our duty:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. May our loving Lord equip you thoroughly to bring His love to each soul that so desperately needs it.

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