

Private Pain Made Public

I have heard that there are certain things you just don't share. As an 'over-sharer' that does not make sense to me. But even if I was not an over-sharer, as a part of the church being built through the suffering and pain of the cross, this seems to be the place where pain is allowed to go public.

When people leave the church it is public and painful. I have left a church and it was painful leaving. I have seen others leave the church I pastor and it is painful. I have heard that if you're a part of a mega church it's not so public or painful. I find that hard to believe unless that person had the superpower of invisibility. But who wants that painful superpower? Let's be public with this reality - It is painful when people leave the church. I want to address why experiencing others leaving the church is painful, and what we can do in the pain.

It is painful because they are family. I like the phrase "church family." The church is the gathered family or household of God. In a particular church, in a particular place, where people are bound together through covenant promises, there you have a family. If a visitor comes one week, or one month, and they leave, it's not painful. They're not family. But when "brother" or "sister" and the "children" leave that's painful. It hurts when even the most difficult family members are severed from a family.

It is painful because they are parts of the body. The church is the body of Christ. He is the head of the body and each person is joined to him as they are to one another. Try severing a part of your body without pain. Each part of the body is joined to every other part of the body and is useful to make the body function as a whole. When one of those parts is suffering we all suffer. But when one of those parts is severed we scream!

It is painful because they are parts of the congregation. The church is a Christian community where every part of everyone's life is meant to touch and affect one another. The church is not individual parts making up an aggregate. When a person who congregates no longer congregates then we not only lose that person, but we lose what that person brought in and out of every other person who is a part of the congregation. Pain is real when we lose something not only of another, but of ourselves and others because that another is gone.

It is painful because there's no return on the investment. The church is a people who "one another" for the purpose of growth. We invest tears and laughter. We invest grace and truth. We invest mercy and direction. We invest criticisms and encouragements. We invest in giving and receiving. All these and other investments in one another's lives that lead to ours and their growth are incomplete when someone leaves. It's not that we haven't grown or that we won't continue to grow, but we won't know the fruit that would have been if they stayed. Planting, watering, weeding, nurturing, and no harvest - that is painful.

There are good and bad reasons people leave the church. Good or bad it is painful. It is going to happen in small and big churches, so what should we do in the pain? The first thing we can do is be committed to God's church where we and others will experience pain. People usually move away or try to move away from pain. But walking by faith in Christ means experiencing difficulty in the church. The apostle Paul said he endured all things for the sake of the elect, and that included some very painful church circumstances. There were people he gave his life for who left the church. He was committed to the church as his mother because he had God as his Father. You can commit yourself to the church by your participation in its worship, life, and ministry together with others, even when those others may cause you pain.

Secondly, we can resist sinful anger in the pain. The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God, even when we don't think someone has good reasons for leaving the church. And when someone's reasons are good and we're angry because God is breaking us up, we must oppose what is crouching at our door. Our sinful anger will lead to things like bitterness, gossip, slander, despondency, anxiety, and an ungrateful heart. When the sun sets on our anger, our darkened hearts experience and inflict excruciating pain. Therefore, we must express our hearts of disappointment, sadness, and anxiety to our loving God. We must let him counsel and comfort us with his promises of his accepting and belonging love. We must trust him for the grace of faith to experience hope in an enduring and everlasting church that is nothing but an expression of love from him, to him, and with others. We must let the wisdom of his good, wise, and powerful sovereign rule soak our hearts.

This expression of our hearts and godward trust is necessary not only in the quiet of our closets, but with our church family around a cup of coffee or over a phone line. Here with our loving God and with one another we learn from his grace to express gratitude and not gripe being gripped by anger.

Finally, we can live at the cross where the pain makes sense and can be for ours and others good. At the cross Jesus experienced, not only the pain of those he loved fleeing from him, he suffered the pain of his Father's face turned away. He was forsaken suffering the pangs of hell. His pain took away all our sin. This pain provided for our entering the very holy presence of God accepted, delighted in, and loved. Jesus experienced pain so he can sympathize with our pain. His suffering and death is over. He has passed through the heavens so that he can help us by his grace and mercy from his throne of grace. But he had to pass through the pain of the cross. We are not our own. Bought by the price of his blood, we're his and our way is that of the cross. His pain was public so we can be with him and he with us in our pain and nothing, not any pain, will separate us from his loving embrace. It is this love of God in pain that enables us to love others in their and our own pain, even in painful circumstances of leaving or being left.

Orthodoxy - Justice & Mercy

New City Catechism Question 19: Is there any way to escape punishment and be brought back into God's favor?

Answer: Yes, to satisfy his justice, God himself, out of mere mercy, reconciles us to himself and delivers us from sin and from the punishment for sin, by a Redeemer.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him;
 he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
 he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
 by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
 make many to be accounted righteous,
 and he shall bear their iniquities. - Isaiah 53:10-11

When someone dies we call it tragic, even when someone who has lived a good long life and dies of natural causes, it is a loss. Loss is tragic. It is not a pleasure to lose or suffer loss. If I lose a sock that belongs to a pair, I want to know what happened to that sock. I want to know why the other sock is all alone in my drawer with no purpose. It's not tragic but it is still a loss. If I lose a loved one, my wanting to know why will never be satisfied in this life. My grief will, in some measure, last a lifetime. I will and others will never be the same because we have lost someone we shared life with. That's tragic. Losing a sock and losing a loved one are not a pleasure. But when God gave his only Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, the prophet Isaiah calls this, "the will of the Lord to crush him." The KJV translates it this way, "Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him;". It was God's pleasure to put forward the Son of God to death because "the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand." The will of the Lord and the pleasure of the Lord are the same thing here. It was God's pleasure that Jesus died on the cross because it was God's pleasure that his purposes were accomplished. And to dwell on those purposes is to dwell on the good news of God's redemptive purposes in our lives.

Jonathan Edwards says that there is nothing that Christians in heaven or earth can find to dwell on as grand as these purposes accomplished by the pleasure of God. He asks, "Is there anything so worthy to be the objects of their admiration and love, their earnest and longing desires, their hope and their rejoicing, and their fervent zeal, as those things that are held forth to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ?" God's pleasure is revealed in the gospel to effectively penetrate our hearts in their deepest recesses to move our whole beings powerfully to him in love for his glory and others good. Therefore, it is God's pleasure to save us from his wrath through his mercy by substituting his own Son to die for us. This is not tragic. It is glorious.

God was pleased by Jesus' trust and love expressed in his righteous life and suffering in our place. God was pleased that Jesus willingly suffered and died, satisfying the just judgement of God in place of guilty sinners, forgiving them and rescuing them from his wrath. God was pleased because the inglorious death on the cross proved to be the way to glory for the Son and all those the Son died for in love. God was pleased because he made a way to rescue and reconcile his creatures so that they would glorify him for his grace. The death of Jesus for the life of sinners suffering misery and wrath is all of grace. God was pleased by the wrath absorbing death of his Son merely because he loves his children. This is not tragic. This is an escape from God's wrath with transforming power. We must humble ourselves each day before the pleasure of God revealed in the death of his Son, so that we are deeply affected.