

"Turning Towards Suffering" by Sandra Miller

Seekers Church

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Sandra Miller

Turning Towards Suffering

Given the Old Testament reading from this week's lectionary and the current situation in the Middle East it would be natural for me to wrestle a sermon from my own feelings as a Jew out of it all, but that's not my sermon to give and it is not the word that God planted in me.

This Sunday marks the beginning of a new season in Seekers Church, which [Celebration Circle](#) has in the past simply called Summer, but this year felt compelled to give a more meaningful title and so renamed it the Green Season. For me, green represents evidence of the growth whose promise we see in spring. The sort of hmm, "serious" growth that is displayed in big, bright sunflower heads full of seeds at the top of what was in spring just a small bit of green in a peat pot at the nursery. Alternatively, we see it on the tree limb that now wears a crown of fully-grown leaves that were mere sprouts on what was just a small knob on the trunk of a mature tree, still growing despite the large number of internal rings that mark its years of existence. What an amazing and mysterious thing this potential for growth is that is a gift of God. Growth is a recurring promise of grace alive in the world.

This particular green season carries with it the theme, or rubric of *Becoming Prayer*, inviting each of us and this Body of Christ to examine not just the current theme, but the whole of the natural progression of themes from Lent through Pentecost of *Re-Viewing the Covenant, Seeing New Promise, and Living the Vision*. Though the particular language Celebration Circle chooses to identify the themes of the season changes from year to year, the substance of the work that we as Christians are called to do during these seasons remains a constant. This most recent cycle asked us to sink ourselves into prayer about and examination of our covenant with the Abiding Spirit, and from that inward/outward journey to see and embrace the promise for our own selves and the whole Body in the life of Christ so that we are empowered to live out that promise in our lives. And now we are further invited to actually **become** prayer.

So, how can we look at becoming prayer, something we understand as a non-corporeal concept that for some of us is a challenge to do as a daily practice outside this becoming? What does it mean to become prayer? If I parse our current reflection by Michael Quoist, which posits, "If we knew how to listen to God, if we knew how to look around us, our whole life would become prayer. ...it unfolds under God's eyes and no part of it must be lived without being freely offered to God" I find some truths that both muddy the waters and provide me with a drink of the Living Water.

If I grasp even a tiny possibility that in my own personal life I can learn to listen to God and to look around me at God's constant grace, I am still faced with the reality of what I know to be my experience in the world, my own struggle and failures to be the best that I can be. St. Augustine, according to his treatise the *City of God*, believed that all

human history is a struggle between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the World and that the two kingdoms are not political kingdoms distinct from one another but that each struggles for mastery inside every person. I am decidedly living my life as a struggle between the two. I take my faith and my commitment to this community and its membership commitment vows very seriously. I am also acutely aware of the fact that I do not live up to every one of the Seekers' membership vows personally, and I believe that if I tried I would be spread too thin to be present in the work I feel God calls me to do in the world. As those of you who know me know, I take my call to ministry at Joseph's House to be my call in the world. I trust that other Seekers and other people are called to the different aspects of God's work in the world and that I can lend them my support through prayer and donations. I also recognize that my rationalization for not trying to live up to each of those vows personally may not be valid, and that one real reason is that I am too wedded to my creature comforts. One of the breaks I took from writing this sermon was to try on some clothes I ordered that finally arrived. Though I "should" not have spent the money because of a self-imposed budget, I did so that I could have more than one outfit to wear outside of work. I am feeding my vanity. Mind you, I have plenty of clothes to wear for most occasions if I would simply exercise more and eat less in order to fit into them once again. Moreover, this exercising more and eating less is something I desire to do in my struggle to live more fully into the City of God – it would mean that I was taking the stewardship of the gift of my body and the resources of the world seriously. My personal illustration may or may not hold validity for you, but I hope it makes a point.

The next piece I would like to parse, the last part of the reflection quote: "no part of it [life] must be lived without being freely offered to God" is what I really want, well, not

want, but feel compelled to talk about today. No part – including the difficult parts, the parts that call me to experience the heart of our faith, compassion, and strains my ability to be compassionate to the very limits of my endurance in witnessing or experiencing suffering.

Mother Teresa is known to have prayed, “May God break my heart so completely that the whole world falls in.” On my good days this is also my prayer, as well as what I felt happened to me when I heard that Israel had bombed Lebanon last week. Mother Teresa is also known to have said, and I am paraphrasing here, that she was humbled by God’s trust in her but she wished God did not trust her so much. That is, on my less than good days, my lament because I do think that God trusts me, and that can be too much for me to bear. Perhaps by the end of my sermon I will manage to tie all of this together, but maybe not. This is after all a sermon from my heart, a sermon from that place which longs to know how to listen to God, how to look around me, and let my whole life become prayer. It is sermon as prayer, and not all prayers tie together very nicely.

The seeds for this sermon came during my participation in Frank Ostaseski’s June workshop on “Turning Towards Suffering” sponsored by Joseph’s House. The workshop was for those whose work it is to be caretakers of the living and who care for people at the end of their lives. If we believe, as I do, that our life in Christ calls us all to be caretakers, and that since we are all concurrently living and dying, we are all called to care for the dying.

I resisted the temptation to take a preaching date for several weeks because turning towards suffering is a hard subject to talk about, a hard subject to hope anyone wants to hear about,

and a hard subject to bring to this community where some have been asking "where is the joy?" The escalation of violence in the Middle East and the lack of appropriately outraged response here in the US by our government and the majority of Jews alike have made it still harder for me to face my own suffering. And yet, here I am because despite all the obstacles, I am coming to understand that it is precisely in turning towards suffering, in embracing suffering, that we have a chance to have our hearts broken so that the world does fall in and we can become prayer. Then maybe we can find joy even in the midst of suffering because we have come closer to God.

Suffering has many faces and many degrees – it lives close to home and far away. Our culture allows that we can individually suffer from the common cold and whole peoples can suffer the effects of natural disasters. Our language makes no distinction between these vastly different ways of experiencing suffering, nor in the way that we experience the suffering of others. Our culture also affords us many opportunities to avoid suffering.

I think that there is much to be learned in looking at how one avoids suffering. I am not talking about avoiding the common cold of course. I am talking about how we block out our own and others deep suffering. I hope you will all choose to participate in a short exercise. Without any fuss, please choose a partner sitting next to you and turn your chairs to face each other. We will spend a total of just 6 minutes on this, each person taking the full 3 minutes at each role. Choose one of you to go first. Now everyone take a deep breath, the breath of life, and feel your presence in your own heart and body, and to your partner. Then the one who is going first will ask the other "How do you avoid suffering?" Do not load the question by nuance of intonation or emphasis, just ask the flat question. Those of you who are answering say the

first thing that comes to your mind. Do not think about this – your reaction should be from the gut. Answerers may draw a blank and it is ok to say, “I don’t know,” but do not give into the temptation to absent yourself from the exercise by replying, “I don’t know” every time. After the asker receives an answer say thank you, then ask again. This is not an invitation to conversation. Answers should be just a few words, an immediate reaction to the question from the heart. Askers should not comment on the answer, just say thank you and ask the question again. Continue this pattern of asking and thanking for the full three minutes. I’ll ring the bowl at the beginning, at the 3 minute mark when you will change roles, and at the end.

When I did this exercise as part of Frank’s workshop my answers became a form of confession, in other words, a prayer – one that ever since then has come up to the surface of my heart and mind, but not always when I need it most. After all, I am an imperfect being. One surprising thing for me when I first did this was how many commonalities there were between my answers and my partner’s answers. I imagine many of you heard things like “I pull the covers over my head,” “I watch mindless television,” “I eat,” and “I stop reading the news.” The good news in this is something we have heard many times, and in our human frailty need to hear repeatedly and that is that we are not alone in our suffering. The other surprising thing I learned was how good it was to say thank you every time my partner confided in me, which became saying thank you to myself for my own confidences since our confessions were so similar. I hope that the lesson in this that we come to a place where we do not condemn our avoidance. Our ability and inability to be present to suffering is a natural process of expansion and contraction within and to our whole selves and God’s whole world. Be tender with your methods of avoidance and allow them to put you in touch with your mind/body/heart

connections. The invitation that Frank extended from this exercise was to get to a place where you could ask yourself: "What would it be like if you could thank yourself for your avoidances?" and "What would it be like to invite relationship with suffering when it is present – to allow yourself to find the holy mystery in that suffering?"

Particularly when it comes to being present with the suffering of a loved one, or in contemplating the enormity of suffering in a troubled and hurting world it is natural to be overwhelmed. We tend to think that we do not know what to do, or even if we know what to do in the moment, ultimately what we do is pointless. No single one of us can take away the pain of someone whose body is being eaten away by disease, nor can any one of us apply ourselves to every injustice in the world, and furthermore if we open ourselves to the suffering of others, then we too suffer.

I do not know why we suffer. What I do know about suffering and why I am trying to learn how to turn towards it is this:

- when we become adept at pushing away; not engaging; keeping at arm's length, we suffer from self-imposed loneliness and being unknown
- if we turn away we are rejecting a part of ourselves and we become un-whole and without access to the full resources of God's grace
- when we embrace it, it ceases to be a threat and becomes an opportunity to be closer to God
- when we come closer to God our turning towards suffering leads us to compassion
- compassion allows us to stay with the suffering until we get through to our personal truth in our life with Christ, even if it doesn't alleviate the suffering

Each time we turn towards suffering, we have an opportunity to see from a different perspective and perhaps grow further into our faith. Frank Ostaseski has a Buddhist perspective on this that goes “when you see a telephone pole swaying in a storm and you are without shelter you don’t run away. You go up to the pole and hold on because that’s the safest place to be.”

Peter, in 1st Peter 4:12-13 put it this way:

Dear Friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

All of this is to say that prayer allows us to turn towards suffering and turning towards suffering brings us closer to Christ. In praying, we are learning to listen to God whether the voice is a mere whisper or a shout from the highest mountain, and to see the world around us in both its glory and its pain. It is not just in turning towards suffering that we become prayer, but it is one way, and a way that is needed in this hurt and hurting world. In our prayer life we are caring for our heart, and in caring for our own heart we are caring for the heart of God, and that is perhaps becoming prayer.