

THE FOUR F'S OF OUR RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

(10/17/2021)

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 15:1-11

John 12:1-8

“Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” (Deut. 15:10-11)

Two weeks ago, I said something in a sermon that evoked a positive response. As I recall, I was talking about how we might respond to all that is going on in the world, in our country, and in our lives. I was thinking of income inequality, our destruction of the environment, our less than enlightened response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the problems with our healthcare system, the current political polarization in our nation’s capital, the fascist movements in our country and around the world, and the revival of tribalism, with its accompanying racial and ethnic animosity.

The current state of affairs is, in a word, discouraging! It leads us to wonder whether we human beings are really evolving, whether we are moving forward into the kind of world that God intends for us, whether we are truly serving as co-creators with God of a just society where people of all races, ethnic origins, genders, sexual orientations, and religious beliefs can live together in peace and harmony, and where we can work together to create a better world, a better life for all.

So, how are we to respond to this crazy, messy world and this crazy, messy life? Personally, I find that I see too much darkness, too much evil, too much self-centeredness, too much greed, too much unnecessary suffering and tragedy, too much stupidity, too much systemic and personal racism, too much homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism, too much war, too much cruelty, too much religious fundamentalism and fanaticism to be an optimist.

I also see too much caring and sharing and helping, too much reaching out, too much compassion, too much creativity, too much beauty, too much joy, too much healing, and too much love to be a pessimist.

I probably fall into the category of what the psychologist William James called a *meliorist*. Meliorism is a sort of midpoint between optimism and pessimism. The world is as it is. Like all aspiring bodhisattvas, I just want to accept it, and embrace it, and love it, and then do whatever I can to *ameliorate* the conditions that cause unnecessary suffering. It seems to me that this is what Jesus did. It seems to me that this is what Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, did. I believe that this is how we are called to live as Christians.

This past year, I read a book entitled *Seven Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering*, written by Scott Samuelson who teaches philosophy to students at Kirkwood Community College in Iowa City, Iowa, and to inmates at Oakdale Prison. In his book, Samuelson, from a philosophical perspective, addresses this fundamental problem of human existence.

There are several kinds of suffering. Some is healthy; it is in the service of a goal. Unnecessary suffering is suffering that does not have any teleological purpose or psychologically/spiritually growth-producing outcome. Examples are the suffering that comes from forces we identify as evil, the suffering of children, needless suffering, and the suffering of animals. As Samuelson puts it, “The suffering of children sharply illustrates the gap between how the world is and how we think it should be.”

Samuelson tells us that there are two basic responses to unnecessary suffering, which he calls the fix-it and the face-it attitudes. He then adds a third “F” when he identifies the “forget-about-it” attitude, and a fourth, which is to face it and then fix it. This fourth response is the response of meliorism.

The forget-about-it response to pointless or preventable suffering is probably the most common. As the French philosopher Blaise Pascal suggested, “Being unable to cure death, wretchedness, and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things.” This is the defense mechanism of denial. As Pascal puts it, “The fact is that the present usually hurts. We thrust it out of sight because it distresses us.” Out of sight; out of mind.

There are various ways to avoid facing a reality that we find difficult, emotionally unacceptable, or intolerable. We flee from trauma through the defense mechanism of dissociation. We flee from the pain of our troubles through drink or drugs. We flee from silence, from being alone with ourselves by filling every moment with television, internet exploration, or meaningless activity. We do this with such regularity that we no longer recognize it as a defense.

This temporary flight into distraction doesn’t work in the long run. As Samuelson notes, “ultimately to forget about suffering is to lose our humanity.” The comedian Louis C.K. describes an experience he had upon hearing Bruce Springsteen’s “Jungleland” on the radio. Louis suddenly realized that instead of trying to flee from his anxiety, he should face it and let it wash over him. When he did so, he discovered that the experience was “beautiful!” He realized, as he put it, that “Sadness is poetic! You’re lucky to live sad moments! When you let yourself feel sad, your body has antibodies; it has happiness that comes rushing in to meet the sadness.” I think (I hope) we have all had this experience, perhaps during grief, perhaps even in relation to our present life situation.

It doesn't do any good, at least in the long run, to refuse to face what needs to be faced. It doesn't do any good to try to repress what we find painful. This insight is central to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which utilizes various types of exposure experiences to encourage and enable the patient to face into his/her fears rather than flee from them. Depth psychology builds on this dynamic when it teaches that if we simply make the unpleasant symptoms go away, we fail to learn the life lessons they would teach us. These two psychotherapeutic approaches, each in its own way, lead us to the second option, the option of "fix it."

Samuelson says that when we adopt the fix-it attitude in response to suffering, "suffering appears as a grievance to be resolved: we'd be better off if we could minimize, even eliminate it." The basic approach to everything we find difficult, distasteful, or unpleasant here in the West is to fix it. This is a problem-solving approach. That's why we invented science and technology. If it's difficult to cross a river, we build a bridge. If we need to make our house cool in the summer, we invent air conditioning. If we are diagnosed with cancer, we have the tumor surgically removed, radiated, and/or attacked with chemotherapy. If we don't like the way we look when we get older, there is always Botox or cosmetic surgery.

The problem with this approach is that it is built on an inflated sense of our capabilities. It assumes we can do something that we really can't do. Let's take the example of death. We know that death, for many, is a source of existential anxiety, even dread. But is it a problem that we can solve or fix? There is an industry, cryogenics, that (for a hefty price) will deep freeze you while you are still alive, promising to thaw you out and wake you up when science and medicine have discovered a cure for whatever would have brought about your death.

Aside from Ted Williams' son, who tried to preserve his dead father's severed head in the hope of eventually producing another .400 hitter (as if being a .400 hitter were totally attributable to what is in one's head), most of us are not excited about this option. I have met with many families who are grieving the loss of a loved one, and not one has asked me what I know about freezing their loved one in the hope that over the next fifty to a hundred years we might find a cure for cancer, heart disease, etc., and bring their loved one back to life (only to die again later of some other cause). Most people, though they don't like it and would probably vote against it if they had the option, accept death as a part of life. In addition, imagine the kinds of problems we would have on this earth if, from this point in history on, no one ever died!

I remember thinking about the fix-it philosophy when I was considering a ministry of prison chaplaincy (I opted for chaplaincy in a state mental hospital instead.). The fix-it attitude toward the rehabilitation of prisoners assumes that all criminals can be rehabilitated. When we fail to rehabilitate a sociopathic killer, it is because we did not utilize the correct approach. We offered Freudian therapy when we should have offered Jungian. Our failure to rehabilitate all

prisoners, to empty out our prisons, and even to prevent crime, is on our shoulders, and we should feel guilty for not doing so. We simply need to try harder—or try in different or more enlightened ways.

But what if some people are not able to be rehabilitated? Many years ago, I read a two-volume set entitled *The Criminal Personality* by Samuel Yochelson and Stanton Samenow. The authors stated that they, like many of us, would like to believe that everyone is basically good. This is the basic stance of humanistic psychology. It is a fundamental tenet of both Christianity and Buddhism. However, the authors state that, despite this core belief, they found individuals within whom they were unable to discern the spark of good that they believed was in the core of everyone. Was it because they didn't try hard enough, or they didn't utilize the right approach? Or was it because some people are simply evil and are unable to be rehabilitated?

Can everything we don't like at least potentially be fixed? Can we eliminate all cancer, all heart disease, all illness if we try hard and spend as much money as it would take? Can we eliminate all poverty, all racism, all greed? Can we eliminate crime and mental illness? Can we eradicate the annoying limitations of old age and death, the ultimate enemy of life? The belief that we can do so was stated forthrightly in the first edition of the *Journal of Religion and Health*, where the editor articulated his belief that the cause which this journal served was the ultimate elimination of all illness, all disease. When I read this, I questioned whether this laudable goal was possible, and whether, even if it were possible, it would be a worthwhile goal.

A variation of the “fix-it” approach is the belief, the hope that God will cure our illnesses, that God will miraculously intervene to solve our individual and collective problems. Some religious people pray to God to defeat the coronavirus. They opine that “instead of trusting in science, we should put our trust in God—who removes all diseases.” This way of thinking leads us to wonder (with anger) why God didn't prevent our loved one from dying. God, like an omniscient and omnipotent father, should solve all our problems and take our pain away!

Admittedly, there was a time when, within our own Judeo-Christian tradition, people saw God acting through miraculous interventions, bringing both illness and health, death and life, times of plenty and times of want. By Jesus' time, scripture began to witness to a God who was working in the world not only through Jesus but also through people like the disciples. If God was and is working in the world through the risen Christ and through those who are disciples of the Way, then God is working in the world through people like you and me, through scientists and physicians. God will probably not miraculously remove the coronavirus from the earth, but God may help us find the strength and the discipline and the empathy and the compassion to respond to it in healthy and helpful ways.

The first of the “Four F’s” is flee from it, to forget it. The second is to fix it. The third is to face the fact that there are some problems in life that can neither be fixed nor eliminated. The fourth option, the one I prefer, is to face the fact that we cannot solve all our problems, all of humanity’s problems, and then do all that we can to fix them. We may not be able to fix what is wrong with life, but we can at least try to make it better. We try because we have no other option if we are to affirm our birthright as co-creators with God of the kingdom of God on earth.

Matthew 26:6-13 relates what happened while Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper early in the week preceding his death and resurrection. While Jesus is sitting at table, a woman enters the room. She takes a jar of expensive ointment and pours the ointment on his head. When the disciples see what she is doing, they become incensed at this senseless waste of money. They are puzzled why Jesus would allow the woman to perform such an extravagant gesture when this ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. The disciples’ response could probably be classified as an example of the “fix-it” approach to the problem of poverty.

Jesus responds by asking the disciples why they are so angry. He tells them that the woman “has performed a good service for me.” He tells them that she has anointed him for his burial. Then comes the troubling verse. Jesus tells his followers, “For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

You will always have the poor with you. This implies that, as Jesus saw it, poverty was not an individual or social condition that could be eradicated simply by sharing what we have or by a more enlightened utilization of limited resources. His ministry was not about the eradication of poverty, though that would certainly be a worthwhile cause. He says that some people will always be poor or sick, no matter what we do. By logical extension, then, some people will always be racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, homophobic, greedy, hateful, and evil. There will always be sociopathic individuals, no matter how hard we try to create the ideal conditions for child rearing and the enlightened rehabilitation of those who have gone astray.

If we cannot eradicate poverty and the other types of suffering that we encounter in life, does this mean we should just shrug our shoulders and accept them as a fact of life? If we look at Jesus’ life, his ministry, I don’t see how we could come to this conclusion. Jesus healed people of various infirmities. He fed the five thousand. He drove out the demons that possessed people. He raised Lazarus from the dead.

I think Jesus’ response to poverty draws from a teaching from one of the sacred books of his religious tradition, the Torah. In Deuteronomy 15:11, we read,

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.

As Jesus said, the poor will always be with us. There will never cease to be someone in need upon the earth. But simply acknowledging this to be the case is not enough. Although we need to “face it,” we can’t simply accept it as an unalterable fact of life. We need to “open our hand to the poor and needy neighbor in our land.” We need to do what we can to help.

If Jesus is in our heart, when we encounter the radical poverty that devastates the lives of so many in our country and around the world, we will be touched with empathy; we will be moved with compassion. We will simply *have* to reach out, just as Jesus did, because not to do so would be a denial of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, a presence that leads us to the realization of the deep interconnectedness of all sentient life. We reach out because Jesus told us that as we do it to one of the least of these, his brothers and sisters, *our* brothers and sisters, we do it to him. Some problems are not solvable, not able to be fixed. Knowing this, we still do everything we can to make it better.

When we face what we are not inclined to face, when we accept and embrace the realities of life, even those parts of life that are resistant to change, we discover that something within us arises to meet the challenge. It is as Louis C.K. said: the antibodies of happiness arise within us to counter the sadness we feel. The existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, who wrote *The Plague* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, both of which speak a word to our time, says it best:

*In the midst of hate, I found there was, within me, an invincible love.
In the midst of tears, I found there was, within me, an invincible smile.
In the midst of chaos, I found there was, within me, an invincible calm.*

*I realized, through it all, that, in the midst of winter, I found there was, within me,
an invincible summer.
And that makes me happy.*

*For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me,
there’s something stronger, something better, pushing right back.*

When we face what’s wrong with ourselves, our nation, and the world, accept it, embrace it, and then do everything we can to fix it to make it better, we discover that great power within us that is working right along with us! This helps us, in our darkest hours, to realize that we are not working alone, and that when we reach out to others in compassion and love, we are working with Jesus to ameliorate needless suffering and bring about the kingdom of God on earth.

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