Suffering and Grace

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Objectives

• At the end of this second teleconference you will be able to:
  – Identify a theme of transformative suffering in the Hebrew scriptures;
  – Name three ways chaplains are called to reflect the prophetic role;
  – Name causes of religious struggle and at least three potential chaplain interventions.
Suffering

Suffering

– Exiled from
  • Home
  • Control over our body
– Physical pain
– Mental pain
– Spiritual pain

Grace

• Our Chaplains thoughts:
  – People
  – Pure gift.
  – A gift upon a gift (nature).
  – Boundless generosity; inherent basic goodness.
  – Prevene (goes before my efforts), god's love, thanksgiving, bedrock.
  – Unceasing.
  – Freely given with love and unearned.
  – Pure gift, something we receive gratuitously, something we cannot earn or deserve.....
Our Lady of Sorrows

- 14th century Black Death
- Image of Mary’s
  - Hospitality
  - Compassion
- A mother who would have listened to Jesus through all his ups and downs;
- Stood by with her presence when there was nothing she could do.

Suffering

- Mental Pain
  - Thoughts impact feelings.

- Some thoughts are delusional.
Spiritual Pain

• Where is God (the divine)?
• Why am I being punished?
• God is not helping me.
• There is tension with my family members.
• I cannot pray.
• I cannot hope.
• My sense of self is threatened.

Suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures?

• Adam and Eve, Babel – trying to manage because we forget unconditional love
• Abraham – Covenantal relationship
• Jacob – family interactions and woundedness
• The Exodus – from slaves to identity as God’s people
• The Kingdom
• Times of exile
Abraham: Faith in Covenant

• After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”
• Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

— Genesis 22:1,2,8

Israel – You have striven with God

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

Genesis 32: 24-28
A Reconciling Journey

• The Covenant
• The Shekinah
• From slaves to identity as God’s people
• False gods – attempts to manage

The Prophet Listens to the Heart of God During Exile

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah 31: 31-34
Chaplains’ Prophetic Call

- Listen to the suffering of God’s people;
- Listen to call of God back to covenantal love;
- Listen to the patient wherever they are on the journey;
- Listen to the family;
- Be, by your behavior, a reminder of God’s faithful presence in the midst of suffering.
- Others on the treatment team work to intervene medically with suffering. The chaplain is the person who can be present to the patient’s suffering.
- Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his going forth is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.
- For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.
  - Hosea 6: 3, 6

Suffering Challenges Common Assumptions

- Life is fair;
- I am in control of my life;
- Life is good;
- There is a loving God who ensures that people get what they deserve.
- My body is (should be) sacred – limits who touches me and how I am touched
Suffering: A Threat to Our Worldview

Definitions

• “Religion is for a person who wants to go to heaven and spirituality is for a person who has been through hell.” Psychiatry patient

• “The way up is the way down.” John of the Cross, a Christian Mystic 16C
Reconciliation with our Selves

• Elijah was afraid and ran for his life... he went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”

• All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.”

  • 1 Kings 19: 3-6
Suffering: A Threat to Our Worldview Understanding of God

Reflections of A Contemporary Woman

I had to think about a God who would not save my son. Wade was—and I have lots of evidence; it’s not just his mother saying it—a gentle and good boy. He reached out to people who were misfits and outcasts all the time. He could not stand for people to say nasty things about other people; he just didn’t want it. For a 16-year-old boy, he was really extraordinary in this regard. I wish I could take credit for it, but I can’t. You’d think that if God was going to protect somebody, he’d protect that boy. But not only did he not protect him, the wind blew him from the road. The hand of God blew him from the road. So I had to think, "What kind of God do I have that doesn’t intervene—in fact, may even participate—in the death of this good boy?" I talk about it in the book, that I had to accept that my God was a God who promised enlightenment and salvation. And that’s all. Didn’t promise us protection. I’ve had to come to grips with a God that fits my own experience, which is, my God could not be offering protection and not have protected my boy.

Elizabeth Edwards, 2007
Suffering: Coping that Transforms Our Worldview

- Discovery → Conservation → Conservational Spiritual Coping → Spiritual Struggle → Transformational Spiritual Coping
- Violation, Threat, and Loss
- Spiritual Disengagement

Ken Pargament, 2007

Struggle As a Fork in the Road

Transformation can lead to
- Growth
  - A deepened Sense of God’s love
- Decline
  - Anger with God
Spiritual Dis-integration

• Problems of small gods
• Problems of false gods
• Problems of clashes within
  – Ambivalence toward the sacred
  – Self-degradation in relation to the sacred
  – Demonization of the self and others
  – Internal sacred wars.

Pargament, 2007

Growth

“I knelt by my bed every night and prayed for God to take away my illness (schizophrenia). Finally, he answered my prayer. He promised he would always be with me.” Patient
Decline

A person speaking to her friend newly diagnosed with breast cancer: “Surely there’s something in your life which is displeasing to God...You must have stepped out of his will somewhere. These things don’t just happen.”

Cited in Pargament, 1996

Positive Religious Coping

I look to God for strength, support and guidance in this situation.
I pray for others who face a similar situation.
I look to my religious body for spiritual support.
I ask God to help me find a new purpose in living.
Negative Religious Coping

I wonder whether God had abandoned me. 23.5%
I felt punished by God for my lack of devotion. 20.6%
I wondered what I did for God to punish me. 20.6%
I questioned God’s love for me. 19.1%
I wondered whether my church had abandoned me. 7.6%
I decided the devil made this happen. 11.8%
I questioned the power of God. 21.0%

238 patients with diabetes, cancer or congestive heart failure.
Fitchett et al., 2004

Pastoral Interventions

• Screen and Assess
• Interventions
  – Be willing to listen to suffering with compassion and acknowledge the pain – that is where God is;
  – Help the patient connect with their own inner resources;
  – If necessary, help the patient connect with their family;
  – If possible, invite a larger worldview. It takes time.
Religious Struggle Screening Protocol

1. Is religion or spirituality important to you as you cope with your illness?

   YES
   - How much strength/comfort do you get from your religion/spirituality right now?
     
     a) all that I need
     - For A, go to Question 3
     
     b) somewhat less than I need
     c) none at all
     - For either B or C, thank patient & check #3 on follow-up

     3. Would you like a visit from a chaplain?

        YES
        - Thank patient & order chaplain visit

        NO
        - Thank patient for their time

   NO
   - Has there ever been a time when religion/spirituality was important to you?

     YES
     - Thank patient & order spiritual assessment

     NO
     - Would you like a visit from a chaplain?

        YES
        - Thank patient & order chaplain visit

        NO
        - Thank patient for their time
Shade

I walked in the shade
Protecting myself,
For I wanted to give my soul,
A body,
Without blemishes,
Without scars.
A body,
not scorched in heat;
A body,
without wounds,
Without pain.

I wanted my soul
To wear a body
Of soft and radiant
Virgin morning.

But, only when I passed
through the blazing noon of
pain
My soul could find some
shade.

Strange is the kinship
Of pain and solace-
You find shade
only in the sun.

Gulzar