

Pass It -- Pentecost +5B

One human strategy for dealing with pain is to pass it along. Growing up, we even practice our technique. Perhaps you might recall the schoolyard game of “pass it,” wherein a punch on the upper arm – also known as a noogie – or a clamp on the leg just above the knee (a charleyhorse) is almost worth enduring because then you get to find someone to pass it along to. This was not my favorite game. I tried to avoid it, because the people who really enjoyed it were the ones who were big, who gave much better (or worse) than they got, causing pain in outsized proportion to that which they received.

A permutation of this phenomenon of “pass it” occurs in our emotional lives too. What begins as schoolyard shadenfreude – pleasure derived from another’s pain in the bicep or the thigh muscle -- devolves into the proclivity the poet Louise Gluck observes: “Sometimes a man forces his despair on another person.” For those who succeed in finding outlets for their emotional pain, this practice becomes habitual; they derive a bitter form of pleasure from it. But it is fleeting, this pleasure, fruitless and sad – a gift that keeps on taking, like those subscriptions for something or other a month, somethings that we never needed in the first place and which never satisfy. A vicious cycle develops: of fear, anticipation and disappointment, and more attempts at self-willed resolution. This is an addiction from which it is difficult indeed to break free.

Meanwhile, when those on the receiving end of forced despair get wise, they sometimes escape, either by leaving the relationship entirely, or by refusing to accept our despair as theirs. They can adopt habitual responses of their own to inflicted despair, alchemies of love that transform despair just as fast as it comes, into hope. They develop an attitude that says, “*Onyankapon nkum wo no asani, oteasefo kum wo, wuwu,*” if they are Ashanti people, that is. If they are English speaking people they might say

something like, “If God does not kill you, then even if a human being does, you do not die.” Wuwu indeed!

Our spiritual ancestor David is so powerful in the narrative tradition because he embodies the breadth of human response. He is us, making mistakes in truly balanced proportion to his successes. His mistakes include the passing along of his pain and despair, of which today’s story is a glowing, not to say blinding example.

To recap: A man came from Saul’s camp with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. David asked the man, “How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?” “I happened to be on Mount Gilboa,” answers the man, “and there was Saul leaning on his spear, and the chariots and the horsemen were closing in on him and he was dying. He ordered me to put him out of his misery, so I did. Here are his crown and armlet my lord.”

Then David took hold of his own clothes and tore them and put dirt on his own head, and mourned and wept for Saul and Jonathan. David said, “How the mighty have fallen! I am distressed for my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were he to me, with a love surpassing that of women!” “Where do you come from?” David asked the man. “I am an Amalekite.” Then David called his servants and said, “Come here and strike him down.” So they struck him down and he died. David said to him, “Your blood be on your own head; for your own mouth testified against you, when you said, ‘I have killed the Lord’s anointed.’”

So the man comes with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. In other words, regarding Saul and Jonathan, he’s on the same page as David, griefwise. And yet, David exercises his own grief – passes it along -- by having the man killed. He kills the messenger. By the way, David hadn’t been all that nice to Saul to begin with. So it wasn’t just sorrow, but a poisonous blend of sorrow and guilt, with soupçons of self-doubt and fear of the future that have David’s head in such an homicidal whirl. Don’t forget this is the same David

whose instincts run rampant will balk at the investigation of his treatment of Bathsheba's husband Uriah who, as you know, ended up in a heap, purely to gratify David's lust.

So why isn't David consigned to the rogues' gallery of biblical history? It is because he became aware of this proclivity for forcing despair on others, for scapegoating the weak, for taking emotional as well as physical hostages to absorb our pain. He became aware of it and tried to change it. David is a hero to us, not for his great deeds of war alone, but for his desire to change his proclivities. Witnessing David's struggle to break the cycle of "pass the pain; give it to the powerless," a struggle that we ourselves share, gives us hope for our own liberation.

Eventually David comes to realize that passing along pain does not work. Not only are the scapegoats we choose often able to deflect our despair from themselves by cultivating hope of their own, when we afflict the innocent, we get no satisfaction from it. Our pain comes back to us, sooner or later, in one form or another and usually worse than before. David's violent treatment of the Amalekite messenger condemns, not the Amalekite, but David himself.

A few years ago, you may recall, a pastor named Clementa Pinckney died along with eight other people, during a Bible study in the church he led, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Just 41 years old, Pinckney, was also the state senator for South Carolina's 45th district.

Pinckney once gave a speech about what it means to be an American and a Christian. "America is about freedom, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. And that's what church is all about: freedom to worship, and freedom from bondage to sin, freedom to be fully what God intends us to be, to have equality in the sight of God. And sometimes you've got to make noise to do that, sometimes you have to march, struggle and be unpopular to do that. Sometimes maybe you have to die -- like Denmark Vesey -- to

do that.” Denmark Vesey was one of the founders of that same Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. He attempted to organize a slave rebellion in 1822 for which he was executed.

As we approach our nation’s anniversary, we can use King David’s treatment of the Amalekite to reflect on our own world. We can try to develop the habit of holding a glass to our own relationships, both individually and as a nation and taking responsibility for our own fears of want, of vulnerability, of insignificance. We can consider our society, how we think, how we talk, and how we vote, ever seeking to bring an end to the scapegoating, stereotyping, cowardice, greed, prejudice and tight-fistedness that place the burdens of our struggles and failures on those who are least responsible for them. The impetus to those pointless, ineffective but all too real deaths in Charleston.

Clementa Pinckney did not have to die, any more than Denmark Vesey had to die, any more than King David’s Amalekite had to die. Indeed those deaths, however horrifying, were but pointless, ineffective moments in the ongoing struggle for civility, a struggle we believe will be successful. As the Ashanti also say, “When God fills your gourd with wine and a human being comes and pours it out, God will fill it up again.”

In his speech, Pinckney also discussed why he was called to public service. “There are many people who say to me ‘Why would you as a preacher be involved in public life?’ But our calling is not just within the walls of the congregation. We are part of the life and community in which our congregation resides. There is no inherent conflict between these vocations.”

Being part of the life of the community means opening our doors with the words “All are welcome” and opening our arms with the words, “You are welcome.” It means working to address issues of injustice and poverty with tools of service and love. It means speaking truth to power as did the Amalekite, as did Denmark

Vesey, as did the families of those killed at Emanuel when they spoke words of forgiveness to their loved ones' killer. Being part of the life of the community for a Christian means continually meeting the poisonous spirit, the violent acts and the ungodly language of hatred and passed-along pain that produce the kind of evil that terrible boy in Charleston embodied, meeting all these with neighbor love, with the peace that passes mere understanding, with the spirit of truth, and with language of justice, mercy and humility; meeting them with acts of selfless kindness instead.

Remembering this, let us speak frankly to everyone we meet. Let our hearts be wide open. Let there be no restrictions on our affections. Let us cease to pass along our despair by killing and imprisoning and oppressing the resident alien in our own midst. Instead – as the old song goes -- put your hand in the hand of the one who stilled the waters, who calmed the sea. If you look at yourself then you can look at others differently; so put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee. The one who refused to pass along his despair, but bore it with unceasing charity to all.

After all, nobody else is going to come along to do it. Hear the words of Teresa of Avila, who wrote, "God has no body now, but yours. No hands, no feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which God looks compassion into the world. Yours are the feet with which God walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which God blesses the world."