

The Flesh is Weak

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When I chose the title for this morning, I wanted something familiar, something people would recognize that would, at least, hint at the topic. In choosing “but the flesh is weak,” I joined the long tradition of using a Bible verse for some purpose other than its original meaning. It’s certainly not the first time that it happened, and I’m pretty sure it won’t be the last. But I intend to start a practice of being honest about when I do it. That familiar phrase, “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak,” was really about the apostles being a bunch of skittish, frightened ne’er-do-wells, who couldn’t even stay awake while Jesus prayed. In fact, the first two words of the sentence are “Stay awake.” Throughout the gospels, Jesus had to deal with these 12, who dropped everything to follow him but were wildly inept at times and completely clueless at others. They never really got it together, even when it was spelled out for them. Willing, but weak.

Now, having satisfied my need for Biblical integrity, I think the phrase can be borrowed and used this morning. I think it describes the problem neatly. “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” We feel like our usual selves inside, but we cannot do what we usually do. Our bodies do not respond as they should. It might be injury or disease or just the wear and tear of our time on the planet, making the machinery break down. Things no longer work as we expect them to, and we need to know why. We also want to know when things will get back to normal.

Or, perhaps we feel the same as we always do, but the doctors tell us we are very sick, dangerously sick, life and death sick. At this point our fight-or-flight response kicks in, and then we go into panic mode because there’s nothing to hit and running away is just not possible. We begin to question everything we know about our selves. What can we trust? What is still true? What can I do? When

will I get well? Will I get well? And perhaps the most troubling, “Why is this happening to me?” Right after “what’s happening” comes “why.” When we are sick or injured, the basic assumptions of life are called into question.

Whatever you might have heard, I don’t believe our bodies are just meat machines that carry our brains around. They are the source of who we are. The idea of the body as a lesser thing and the mind as something higher and essentially separate from the body is a hangover from the dualism of Greco-Roman culture. It is also, in my opinion, badly mistaken. Our minds, our souls, if you prefer, come into being as an integral part of our physical selves. They are no more separable than the earth from the sun. The body needs the mind to keep it alive every second of its existence. The mind needs the body to grow it, feed it and communicate with it. All the literary attempts to separate the two are entertaining, but they don’t really hold up to scrutiny. This includes the science fiction versions in which the mind is up-loaded into a computer while waiting for it’s next cloned body. Robert Heinlein wrote one of those and it made a good story, but I just don’t buy it. We cannot escape from our own selves. What happens to the body has repercussions for the mind. What happens to our feelings, ideas and attitudes certainly has an effect on the body. We know that emotional stress produces chemicals that damage the body’s systems. There is also plenty of evidence that laughter has curative powers.

Under the stress of serious illness or injury, people turn to religion in a big way. In the summer of 2003, I worked as a chaplain at San Francisco General Hospital. It’s an amazing place. It combines the resources of a teaching hospital and research center with the challenges of a county-community hospital, where the poorest and sickest of San Francisco get their medical care. It also recognizes the value of spiritual healing, and considers chaplains members of the health care team. I saw patients in all the medical, surgical and psych wards, and I found one thing fairly constant throughout the hospital. I found a tendency for people to think of their illness or injury as a spiritual event. In the psych units, there was a real hunger for spiritual conversation. But while some patients there found comfort in religion, others only found more evidence to prove that their suffering was caused by their own inherent worthlessness.

In the oncology ward I visited a man who had been homeless for a year and was struggling to cope with a diagnosis of lung cancer. His fight or flight reflex had caused him to run away for two months, returning to the hospital when he could no longer stand up. He had a lot to be afraid of. Throughout our conversation, he kept returning to the idea that he would get well and he would repair his broken relationship with Jesus. He never actually said that cancer was God’s punishment for the life he led, but it spilled out of everything else he said. Getting well and doing right were always connected for him. Nothing would separate those two goals in his mind. He did say that he thought of his illness as a “wake-up call” from God. I don’t really know if it was a real desire to

return to his faith or fear of impending death followed by eternal punishment. I do know that I found this “wake-up call” idea all over the hospital. Even a young man who had been hit by a car told me his broken leg was a message from God that he should change his life and go back to school. (I thought God might be telling him to cross at the light, but I didn’t tell him that.) It seems to be dominant in our culture. God wants something for us and will use extraordinary means, even fatal disease, to bring us around. People believe they are sick because they made God mad or, perversely, because God loves them and wants to teach them something.

I find this more than a little troubling. Suffering as the path to redemption is, in my opinion, one of Christianity’s all-time worst ideas. It’s one of the doctrines I choked on in my youth. It follows logically from another really bad idea called “substitutional atonement.” Under substitutional atonement, Christ died for our sins. You know, that phrase you hear from so many Christians. What it means is, God was so angry with us after the Garden of Eden that he condemned us all to everlasting torment in hell. Several thousand years later, God decided to give us a break, so he sent down his own son to be tortured to death so that he could forgive us. Is it just me or does that sound sick and twisted to you too? I feel kind of awkward saying this because I know so many wonderful people, people I love, who believe it. For many Christians, that redemption is the centerpiece of their faith. From my Universalist point of view, I think it’s one of those ideas that just doesn’t survive careful scrutiny. It didn’t show up in the church until *after* the first thousand years, around the time of the first crusade. However, here it is now, all over our culture. It’s the Jesus of Mel Gibson and his movie full of graphic torture. It reduces Jesus to his death alone, ignoring his life and teachings. The idea of redemptive suffering has been used to justify quiet acceptance of all sorts of violence and oppression. Some clergy *still* teach patient forbearance as the proper response to domestic violence, for example. Redemptive suffering is widely accepted as a Christ-like way to live. And often it’s one of the answers people are given when they ask, “Why did this happen to me?”

But if we reject the idea of redemptive suffering, what do we have left? What is there in our failing or broken bodies that endures?

In seminary, we are expected to struggle with all kinds of theological concepts about what we believe, what we don’t believe, what we are willing to teach and preach, and what we feel obligated to oppose. We work on our own religious identity and deal with how to conduct our conversation with the divine. For me that meant, among other things, reclaiming and redefining some of the language of my youth. For example, I have a certain fascination with the phrase, “Thy will be done.” Even if I have a different idea about who’s listening than I did as a child, it still seems to me an important point of surrender, of admitting that I am not able to run the universe without outside help and lots of it. I had more or less advanced the conversation to “Thy will be done, but of course you know I

have plans of my own, and I think these plans fit in nicely with your will, so if it wouldn't be too much trouble, I'd really appreciate any help you could lend to my plans to do what I think is your will, okay? Thanks!"

Then, in February of 2003, that began to break down. I needed blood tests to work as a hospital chaplain. My doctor found some minor anemia and ordered more tests, then more tests, then more tests. Then she sent me to a hematologist, and he ordered more tests and more tests and finally told me in April that I had multiple myeloma, one of the bone marrow cancers. He didn't offer much information, so I looked it up on the Web and it was really, really bad. Everything on the Web was depressing, negative and awful. I went almost overnight from "Thy will be done" to "What? Are you kidding me? I hauled my self up this hill for this? What do you want now?" In addition to feeling frightened and fragile and out of control, I also had a sense of betrayal. I felt sure I was the victim of either malicious attention or outright abandonment from the God I had been reaching out to and hoping to serve. How long would I be able to work as a minister? Would I even be able to finish school? I was unbelievably sad. Everywhere I looked I could see only the bad end of a dark road. As I struggled to finish the semester, I told only the faculty and a few close friends and my home congregation in Redwood City, my extended family.

As I continued to flounder around in the dark, I began to get angry! I became almost Job-like in my prayers, talking back and demanding answers! I began to discover the power of anger as fuel! After one long sleepless night, I lay there in the dark and wrote my graduation speech. Then I rehearsed it, silently, with my eyes closed, for another half hour. Then I went to sleep. It's a litany based on the repeated phrase, "But I am still standing!" It got me through that night and a lot of long, dark nights since then. When I finally deliver it, the evening of May 19th, it will be a little less angry and a lot more thankful. I've had a lot easier time than I expected.

That semester I shared two classes with my friend Tess. We were both going through medical insecurities, waiting for test results and hoping for the best. We leaned on each other, kept each other going through that scary time. She gave me a book of her poetry that year, and I found this poem, "Tantrum," in it. It was a perfect expression of my refusal to suffer in silence. It has been on my office wall ever since.

I'm sick of coping well, doing just fine, sailing through with colors flying.
I'm tired of holding it together,
I want to blow up and fall to earth in a million tiny pieces.

I want to have a tantrum, lie on the floor and kick and scream
and hold my breath until my face turns blue.

I want to hang out my window and scream obscenities
at the moon all night and the sun throughout the day.

I want to make big mistakes, through caution to the wind,
sleep with all the wrong people, and drink way too much
and throw up on the rug.

I want to max out my credit card with a frivolous trip to
some tropical paradise where [beautiful young women]¹
will massage my feet and bring me fruit drinks.

I want to eat cookies right before dinner and ruin my appetite.
I want to run with scissors.
I want to default on my student loans and never pay any stupid taxes.

I want to let the dishes pile up and never vacuum the floor.
I hate vacuuming!
I want to wear smelly clothes and sniff at others
like it's coming from them.

I want to weep my way through kleenex boxes
and not care about having swollen red eyes and a runny nose.

I want to rest in a hospital with kind motherly nurses
and friends bringing flowers on tiptoe.
I want to lie in bed all day with the covers over my head
and not see anyone or hear anyone or think about anything
or read anything or write anything.

I'm sick of being so brave and so calm and so together
and so God damned wonderful.
I do not want to cope well, I want to cope very badly.

Let someone else pick up my pieces. I'm going out for the year.²

I think that my adoption of anger as self-motivation was important. I think it was my way of approaching the process of grieving for what was lost. First, I had to acknowledge that whatever I did with the rest of my life, it would be framed by my disease. That was a tremendous bitter pill to

swallow, and I still struggle with it from time to time. But denial is not at all helpful. At one point, in my journal, I wrote, “Cancer, cancer, cancer, cancer! OK?” Once I wrote that word about myself things shifted in some way. Part of lamentation, the process of grieving, requires that we first name the loss, that we get beyond our protective denial and name it.

Another important thing about lamentation is that it must be done in community. Throughout the book of Lamentations, an amazing piece of Hebrew poetry, the characters are demanding that someone look at their suffering. They don’t ask, they command! They insist that someone see them and acknowledge their pain. If God will not look, then someone else must. They are calling on whoever will bear witness to their pain.

Bearing witness is the foundation of a caring community. Even when there is nothing else we can do, just being there, bearing witness, makes a difference. Any of you folks in my age group remember a song called, “Can I Get A Witness,” by Marvin Gaye? Marvin is lamenting how long it’s been since he’s seen his girlfriend. It’s fun and light, and danceable, but the concept is the same — the lament. Does anybody hear me? Must I suffer alone? Where is there justice for me? Can I get a witness?

Somewhere in those early months I developed a flinch about telling people what I was going through. I had no noticeable symptoms, I didn’t look any different, but I felt exposed and vulnerable so I kept it to myself. But once my classmates knew, they left it up to me how much I would reveal, and, while respecting my privacy, made sure to let me know that they were there for me. My school community would bear witness to my pain and lend me their support and pick me up if I should fall. I even had a whole community of very powerful nuns in Kentucky praying for me. How about that?

In the embrace of my school community and my church community as well, I went to work at the hospital and bore witness to the suffering of others. There was nothing I could do, nothing I could fix for them. Sometimes they wanted to pray, sometimes they wanted a ritual for a loved one who was dying. Mostly though, they just wanted a witness. They wanted someone to see them, hear them and help to name their pain and begin to grieve.

Bearing witness is the single most powerful act of ministry we perform for one another. It allows us to come to terms with our own pain and be a healing presence for others. It’s a concept called the “Wounded Healer,” and while I would just as soon have learned it as an abstract idea, from a book or a seminar, I can’t deny the truth of it.

One of my friends in my home church in Redwood City, Calif., spent most of a year trying to find out what had gone wrong with her body. She was used to the arthritis in her knees and the limits

that imposed on her life. But that year she also had pain and paralysis and fatigue and all kinds of disturbing symptoms. A whole cast of doctors tested and studied and in the end had no idea what was happening to her, no idea what was causing it, no idea when she would recover, or get worse. Eventually, her symptoms went away, and she still doesn't know why. But one thing she does know. When she had no witness, no comfort, no hope from her doctors, her community gathered around and bore witness to her pain. In her words, they provided the best help she got during her ordeal.

When I was trying to keep my cancer to myself, I used the excuse that I didn't want to change the topic of every conversation I was in. Lucky for me, someone had the grace to tell me that, as a minister, it was going to be my job to change the topic of conversations. Also, I was afraid that people would hear the word "cancer" and keep away. I had heard about that sort of isolation. Turned out not to be a problem. As we sang this morning:

When I was sinking down, beneath my sorrow's ground,
friends to me gathered 'round, oh my soul, oh my soul.
friends to me gathered round oh my soul.

And I am still standing.

¹ Originally "Handsome young men"

² "2001 Terese A. Baumberger

