

## “Help For the Hurting”

Some years back a staff writer for the *Miami Herald* named Madeleine Blais read the obituary of a young woman named Judy Bucknell, a young woman who had been murdered. For some reason, this journalist was drawn to find out more. So she checked the police report: Homicide number 106 for the year. Killed June 9, 11:42 p.m. Age 38. Weight: 109 lbs.

Curious, and with a reporter’s instincts, Madeleine was able to obtain Judy Bucknell’s diary, in which the young woman told of her worries: she worried about getting old, getting fat, getting pregnant, getting by.

Judy lived in a stylish section of Miami. She was successful as a secretary, but not at love, or life. Listen to some of what she wrote in her diary:

“Where are the men with flowers and champagne and music? Where are the men who call and ask for a genuine date? Where are the men who would like to share more than my bed, my booze, my food? I would like to have in my life, once before I pass through my life, the kind of sexual relationship which is part of a loving relationship.” Apparently, she never did.

Judy Bucknell wasn’t a prostitute. She wasn’t on drugs or welfare. Never went to jail. Wasn’t a social outcast. Was respectable. She jogged. She hosted parties. She wore designer clothes, and had an apartment that overlooked the bay. But she was very lonely! In her diary, she wrote this: “I see people together and I’m so jealous I want to throw up. What about me? What about me?”

Judy was surrounded by people, yet was on an island. She had many acquaintances, but few friends. Many lovers, but little love. “Who is going to love Judy Bucknell?” she wrote in her diary. “I feel so old. Unloved. Unwanted. Abandoned. Used up. I want to cry and sleep forever.” Sadly, someone put her to sleep forever.

I can’t help but wonder if anyone who knew Judy had any idea of the lonely, aching woman revealed through her diary!

Where do you and I go when we are hurting? Where do we go to find help and consolation? *We all hurt, and we all at times need comforted.* Of course, some of us are pretty skilled at hiding our hurts. *Men* do this a lot! Gotta be macho. Only wimps cry. To admit you hurt means you’re a weakling.

But men aren’t the only ones who cover over our pain – women do it, kids do it. There is this thing in us, where we put on a façade, put on a happy face. We do this a lot in church! We don’t like to admit we may be hurting. But the truth is, we all hurt at times. It’s part of life.

Sometimes we hurt because of our own sin – the foolish things we do, the stupid choices we make, or the things we should have done but didn’t do. Sometimes we suffer pain and the consequences of our own failures and shortcomings.

But often we hurt not because of anything we do, but just because of things that happen in life. Things that happen in our family, our neighborhood, our country. Things that people do to us. Life itself, with its worries and demands.

It's easy to try all kinds of ways to find comfort – to drown our sadness and sorrows in ways that don't help at all. In liquor...sexual flings...immersing ourselves in work...overeating...hard drugs, or ones in our medicine cabinet...unhealthy relationships...developing a protective shell. And, when people are hurting, often the pain is heightened around the Christmas holidays. We have these unrealistic expectations that everybody should be happy at Christmas ("it's the most wonderful time of the year")...but hurting people often hurt more at Christmastime.

***But here's some good news: God wants to comfort us!*** The Scripture reading for today is from Isaiah, chapter 40, a passage often read in Advent, before Christmas, as it's related to preparing the way for the Lord to come). The background for this Scripture is that God's people have been in exile in a foreign land. They've been defeated by their enemies. Their homeland is war-ravaged and in shambles. Why did this happen? Because of God's judgment on them for their sin and rebellion against God.

But now God has forgiven them. God wants to *comfort them* and restore them. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her, that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand, double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:1-2). God wants to come to them, not in fierce judgment, but in healing mercy. Look at this beautiful picture of the Lord's mercy:

"Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good news;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
'Here is your God!'  
See, the Lord GOD comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him  
and his recompense before him.  
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms  
and carry them in his bosom  
and gently lead the mother sheep."  
(Isaiah 40:9-11)

All of us, at times, get wounded by life: we get lonely, discouraged, we feel rejected or defeated – but *there is a God who wants to reach down at these low times of life and lift us up!* God is so wonderful in His comforting power that He is called "the God of all comfort" – "Praise be to the

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3).

Jesus our Savior, because He revealed the heart and nature of God, often gave comfort and hope to people who were broken, and realized they needed help. He could say, "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven," "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

United Methodist Bishop, Peter Weaver, tells of something that happened when he was pastor of a church in downtown Pittsburgh. The church put on a living nativity scene 3 times a night for several weeks before Christmas. The church building was situated right up against the city sidewalk, so the manger scene had to be built around one side of the church's entrance, the one the homeless people would use all year long to enter the food kitchen and shelter.

One of the nights, just as Mary and Joseph entered to place their baby in the manger, a lonely homeless woman who frequented the kitchen walked right up to the manger and approached the young lady playing Mary with these words, "May I please hold the baby?" Taken by surprise, the young woman playing Mary wasn't sure what to do, so she handed the life-sized doll to the woman, who clutched it as if it were her own. From that point on, at each performance, she did the same! Bishop Weaver remarks about how that year the church learned the meaning of the comfort our Lord brought down at Christmas, even to a lady who had very little else in life. "*What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bear...*".

Where do you go when you're hurting? We all hurt at times, and there is a God and there is a Savior who can bring comfort and strength. But you know what? ***That's what the church is for, too.*** The Church is meant to be that community, that fellowship, which embodies the love of Jesus, where people can find a refuge of acceptance and compassion. Romans 12:15 says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."

I had a District Superintendent who stuck by me in a difficult time of life. It was a transitional period in my life – I couldn't decide whether to move to a new church, or go into counseling fulltime. This superintendent really went the extra mile to be there for me, to understand, and to do what he could to help me. Not long after that I was shocked when I heard that he had surrendered his ministerial credentials because of some sexual indiscretion earlier in his life. He made a mistake. He wasn't a close friend of mine, but I felt he needed a friend. I wrote him a letter, letting him know that I appreciated him, cared about him, and was praying for him.

An Episcopal priest named Tom Ehrich once attended a church conference where he heard the well-known priest and author Henri Nouwen speak. Nouwen had dedicated much of his life to working with mentally challenged people. At this conference Nouwen brought one of his mentally disabled friends, Bill, up to the podium to help him with his speech. But Bill, in his nervousness, just laid his head on Nouwen's shoulder and began to cry. Tom Ehrich wrote that at that moment, all those in attendance were reminded of the real purpose of the church. The church is not about buildings and programs, but about people – being there for one another when we hurt, sometimes just being a shoulder to cry on.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God...” (Isaiah 40:1). God reaches out to us when we’re hurting, and the church is to be a place of comfort for all who hurt. But one more thought: ***We can’t stay forever at the point of being comforted. We need to move on in the strength of the Lord.*** Sometimes we can get stuck in our pain and sorrow. All of us probably know people who always seem to be whiney, needy, overly dependent people – sort of paralyzed and stuck in that mode! We want to help them, but somehow we can never do enough, or we get the sense that they want to stay in their helpless, victim mode.

God wants more for us than that! He wants us to move beyond our grief, or our loneliness, or our disappointment! The words in the Bible sometimes translated by the English word “comfort” don’t just mean, “Here here now, let me wipe your tears”! “Comfort” in the Bible means “to be refreshed, to support, to help, to brighten up and encourage.” In other words, when God “comforts” us or we “comfort” one another, the end result should be that we receive the strength to go on in life, to live productively and creatively!

A pastor named Sandra Weisner received the phone call she been dreading. Her 29 year old sister Teri, suffering from lymphoma, had slipped into a coma. After getting the call, she flew from her home in Ohio to be at the bedside of her sister in California. For days, she and other family members sat by Teri’s side in the hospital, listening to the awful sound of the respirator. Finally, doctors told the family that they’d have to decide whether or not to take Teri off life support.

At that point Sandra lost it, and bolted out of the room crying, just about knocking over a pregnant woman in her path. She says, “The next thing I knew I was crouched underneath a gurney, sobbing.” Then the pregnant woman got down on her knees and started rocking her, while Sandra kept crying “My sister is dying; my sister is dying.” The woman stayed with Sandra for about 20 minutes, holding her and stroking her hair until she felt calm enough to return to Teri’s room. “I never saw the woman again”, Sandra said, “but the balm of her love helped me face my sister’s death. I will always be grateful.” See, she was able to allow her pain to surface...she was comforted...but then *she found the strength to move on and face what she had to face.*

In 2 Corinthians, the first chapter, the Apostle Paul talks about going through such a difficult, crushing time of life, that he despaired of life itself (see 2 Corinthians 1:8). But God comforted him in such a way that Paul was then able to comfort others in similar circumstances. The Apostle puts it this way: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). See, that’s pattern: *We receive* comfort...but then we move on...to *give* comfort to others...to share what we’ve received.

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God” (Isaiah 40:1). After God’s people suffered years of banishment from their homeland, God was going to comfort His people once again. They were able to return to their homeland. But some people were reluctant – since this meant

having the enormous task of rebuilding the ruins, starting all over again. So at end of this great chapter, God reassures His people that He will give them the power and strength to move on, to rebuild not only their devastated country, but their own lives. What God tells them represents some of my favorite verses of Scripture: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted, but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:28-31).

Where are we in all of this? Maybe some of us are *hiding behind our pain*, putting on a front, pretending all is well. But it's not. And if we can only come out from behind our happy face and protective armor and admit to God and those around us that we are hurting, we could find help.

Maybe some of us are *stuck in our place of hurting* – feeling sorry for ourselves, and we know it's time to move on – to allow God to lift us out of our loneliness or self-pity or despair, and to once again invest ourselves in joyful living.

And this is certainly a good time for us as individuals, and as a church to commit ourselves to *being a place where hurting people can come*, and find understanding, compassion and encouragement.

*With God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and a loving church, there's hope for all who hurt!*

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