

Don't turn away.

Open our hearts, minds, and spirits, oh great Creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

As part of the discernment process to become a priest, you do a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. This involves spending the summer months as a Chaplain of some kind. Many choose Hospital Chaplaincy, others choose Hospice or live-in facility sites, while others choose Unhoused ministry settings or other non-profit-based work. I did my CPE unit, as it's commonly known at a hospital. I was assigned to a general care hospital floor and the inpatient hospice unit. I also served in an on-call rotation schedule. During one of my on-call shifts, I was called to a woman's room who was preparing for surgery and requested to speak with a chaplain. When I arrived, it was clear she was in a great deal of pain. Not only physically but spiritually. She told me she always talked to God but wasn't sure God could hear her anymore. She told me about her pain and that it had taught her a lot. But she wished all of her life lessons could have been a little bit easier. I asked her to tell me more about how I could help her prepare for her surgery. She asked me to read some scripture with her. Psalm 23 was one she had been reading, as well as Ecclesiastes chapter 3. I told her those were some of my favorites too. She said when she first got sick, she was really scared of the pain, but those passages had helped her find a new perspective. She began to treat her pain with kindness instead of trying to ignore it or push it away quickly. As she got to know it better, it was easier for her to seek treatment or manage her bad days. She was less afraid knowing God's love even if the pain was still present.

In our Gospel today, we encounter Jesus teaching his disciples about the great pain and suffering he is going to encounter as he

continues his journey toward death and resurrection. Peter, who in earlier verses of Mark acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, now seems confused, pulling Jesus aside and rebuking or wanting to correct him now seems less sure about the how of Jesus' Messianic call. I'm drawn to this interaction; I find a powerful message in the text. Here, Peter is exposing his expectations of the Messiah. For Peter the Jesus, who performed the dramatic healings incredible miracles and was so radically inclusive, became the model of what a Messiah looked like. His Messiah was powerful and a healer. Now, to hear that his beloved Messiah would be going through such suffering created some real cognitive dissonance.

As a result, Peter pulls Jesus aside, and Jesus rebukes him with a very powerful line of scripture, "Get behind me, Stan," Jesus reminds Peter that his focus should not be on earthly things but on the divine. I do wonder what Peter said to Jesus to evoke such a response. Clearly, Jesus felt he wasn't acting like himself. Did he pull him aside and ask why he couldn't heal himself?

Or did he say this really doesn't make any sense, Jesus, you're the Messiah? Can't you fix it? Or there must be another way.

I wonder what we might say to Jesus.

Jesus continues saying,

"If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

As Jesus calls the disciples to acknowledge those things keeping them disconnected from God and neighbor, he refocuses their attention toward the divine.

This text is an important reminder for us as well. To not get so caught up in our excitement for Easter that we miss the importance of the days leading up to it. The journey can be just as important as the destination.

Our text today helps remind us of Lent's importance and this season of reflection and turning back toward God. To turn toward Jesus' suffering. To not look away. To be present with those who suffer in our community, including our own, as we should be present to Jesus' suffering.

As was often the case with patients I met while on-call, I never got to finish my conversation with the woman I met. She was taken to surgery shortly after we finished our scripture readings. I did hear that she recovered well and was released home.

She did serve as an important reminder for me, as most of my patients did. She reminded me that when we honor or recognize our own pain and suffering. When we don't look away because we expect ourselves to be perfect or a different version of ourselves, we recognize Christ within us and those we meet. And we can have better empathy for those we encounter who also have pain and who suffer deeply.

While everyone's pain and suffering are different, it is important not to look away and to continue stripping away the barriers that keep us from loving God and our neighbor. Lent is a wonderful time to continue the exploration of the things we need to let go of, let die that no longer serve us. All those things that are of human hands and not the divine.

As we continue our journey with Jesus over the next weeks through his suffering, death, and resurrection, this text calls us to remember that we should not look away.

We must be present to the divine among us. We are being called to go ever deeper into our relationship with God to see Christ in our neighbor more clearly. To be mindful and present to our own expectations of ourselves and others, to not look away yet be present to the Holy Spirit as she calls us into community with one another.

I pray as we continue our journey together that we grow ever closer to Christ, one another, and the deep peace of knowing God's unconditional love for us all.

Amen