

A Conflicted Soul

Luke 9:37-43

The other day I listened to an interview on NPR with Sue Klebold, whose son, Dylan, was one of the gunman responsible for the infamous slaughter at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999—the massacre that set the standard for this unfolding century of schoolyard terrorism. He and his accomplice, Eric Harris, took their own lives after murdering 13 fellow students and faculty and injuring 24 others—many of whom were left with permanent disability. Until Sandy Hook, this was the crime that defined a parent’s worst horror.

Up until recently, the Klebolds have been reluctant to speak in public out of shame and remorse for what occurred and, according to Sue, until she completed a long process of coming to terms with what could have led her second-born son to do such evil, especially when it was so much out of character for him and for their family. She has written a memoir, *A Mother’s Reckoning*, which she hopes will be helpful to those who have children who behave in ways that cannot be easily explained or understood by conventional wisdom or therapeutic models.

As reported by NPR,

For a long time, Sue was in denial about her son’s role in the massacre. She told herself that Dylan had been brainwashed or coerced into the plan—or that he hadn’t really shot anyone. But then she saw the “Basement Tapes,” a set of videos Dylan and Harris had made in which they brandished guns and bragged about the destruction they were planning, and her understanding of Dylan’s role in the rampage changed.

“Seeing those tapes was one of the most shocking, dramatically traumatic things that happened in the aftermath of this, because I had been living with such a different construct to try to cope with what I believed to be true,” she says...

As for Dylan, Sue says she wishes she had listened to him more carefully in the years preceding the shooting. She wonders what questions she could have asked that might have encouraged her son to open up about whatever he was feeling.

She adds that despite everything, she has never stopped loving him. “I will love him until I breathe my last breath,” she says. “He’s like an invisible child that I carry in my arms everywhere I go, always.”¹

I recognize some will dismiss this mother’s lasting anguish, solely out of empathy for the victims and survivors, many of whom still suffer. Yet, I’m glad the Klebolds have finally come forth, because what they have gone through is a hidden horror—one that has traumatized them over the past 17 years. It is harder, in my view, to feel the shame and condemnation for something one did not do, yet is left to bear the responsibility for as a parent. They, as much as the families of victims, deserve our empathy.

From what I understand, they aren’t easy targets for blame. The Klebolds, Sue and Tom, are Jewish and Christian, respectively, introducing their sons to both faith traditions. Prior to the Columbine shooting, she claims they had entertained the thought of leaving Colorado altogether because the legislature was easing gun restrictions across the state—something they strongly opposed, albeit an ironic twist given what transpired. This provides insight into how even well-meaning and -intentioned parents may not realize just how much their children can disown their deeply-held values and principles nor be aware that the culture of their home is being betrayed by the next generation. Haunted by Dylan’s conflicted soul, it’s been a long and painful journey for Sue and Tom Klebold to find hope and meaning in a family that has lost much of what they valued and nurtured in life.

It is often said, mental illness leaves an unmerited legacy for the person suffering with it and, especially, for those impacted by it. No one asks for it. I’m not certain if Dylan was mentally ill (particularly in comparison to others, such as Newtown’s Adam Lanza or Aurora’s James

¹ “Columbine’s Shooter’s Mother: I Carry Him ‘Everywhere I Go, Always,” *Fresh Air*, www.npr.org, 2/16/2016.

Holmes), but I think it is abundantly clear he was not mentally and spiritually well.

Over the years, I've become all-too-aware of how people with conflicted souls and/or mental illness suffer in ways others don't or won't. Honestly, even the resources of faith can seem rather impotent and inadequate to address the depth of frustration and despair many live with in conditions stereotyped and often ostracized by much of society. In particular, those with moderate to severe forms of mental illness, who usually cannot respond to rational guidance or who cannot quiet contrarian impulses or thoughts within them, rarely find comfort in normal community life or worship settings. Yet, social isolation usually ends up magnifying the symptoms of their condition. They don't fit in easily because of their behaviors, but without relationships and social interaction, they are less likely to find a level of managed care and wellbeing. Author Shannon Alder puts it best: "Never give up on someone with a mental illness. When "I" is replaced by "We," illness becomes wellness." This, then, becomes a challenge for many churches today, since we are not very well equipped to support individuals or families dealing with mental disorders of any type, let alone severe ones.

At the same time, mental illness won't account for all of those with conflicted souls. Tormented, despairing individuals are everywhere—some who are traumatized by what has been done to them or by the consequences from actions of their own. Some live with terrible regret or shame; some are conflicted about identity issues, their sexual orientation, their place in their family of origin, or over any number of concerns in their lives. A conflicted soul is a spirit who is not at peace—one that struggles to love him- or herself, or love others, or find any joy in the experience of life

itself. A conflicted soul is one who is tormented within or who torments the world outside of them—and sometimes both. A conflicted soul may be in desperate need of help, but is often unwilling to receive the help they need. Or they may search for help, but find that few, if any, can relieve their pain.

One example of a conflicted soul is here in our text for today—the story of the man whose son was possessed by a demon that could not be removed. It's fair to say that both the son and the father suffered with conflicted souls, each in their own way—one because of his condition, the other because of his love for his tormented son. It's an intriguing story given the presentation of symptoms, though even the various versions of the story portray it differently. In Matthew's version, the boy suffers from epilepsy (which at the time was thought to have been caused by the phases of the moon). In Mark's longer treatment of the story, the boy is clearly demon-possessed. Here in Luke, it's hard to tell since it could go either way, though he seems to reflect Mark's sense of the demonic within, which we have to assume was merely the way psychological disorders were understood in biblical times. What seems evident is that both the boy and his father were not well—the son vulnerable to seizures of some sort and the father deeply distressed over having no control over his son's condition, fearing that evil itself resided within him—leaving him conflicted between the son who ranged between normal (who was easy to love) to one who seemed utterly mad.

That said, as the story is told, the father apparently had sought out Jesus but, for whatever reason, could not reach him. So he went to Jesus' disciples, who were unable to remedy the situation. They were powerless, and perhaps even intimidated, by the uncontrollable forces behind this young man's condition. If you're a fan of the film genre that early on

brought us, *The Exorcist*, you can imagine this scene vividly. But even if this seems a bit extreme, most of us are aware of those whom we know who seem as if their personalities and characters change in fits of anger, stress, frustration, and the like, as if they've lost their senses altogether. This Jekyll and Hyde persona is frightening and intimidating because one never knows what to expect.

In many ways, I can appreciate the ineffectiveness of the disciples' intervention. Psychological disorders (and even many physiological ones) are not easily remedied, even by the latest and greatest in medicine. At best, even today, many disorders are only managed and then left to the self-care of afflicted individuals with oversight from their families. Chronic sufferers are usually high-maintenance people, many of whom will not likely take care of themselves and may even view moderating medications as toxic, thus, requiring constant oversight (usually creating strain within families). So, much like the disciples' ineffective intervention, there are many situations where the hope for help doesn't result in a better outcome. Those who try to provide care reckon with the reality they simply lack the power to control all the variables to heal this person and bring relief to their families.

Yet, in the face of this "impossible" situation, two things occurred. First, Jesus called out the futility of his disciples' efforts, rebuking them for a lack of belief (which includes a cynical reluctance to get involved). Second, he alone then exorcised the toxic spirit out of the boy. In Luke's setting, only Jesus is able to transform this situation out of hopelessness; all others fall into the trap of "unbelief." However, in Mark's version of the story, Jesus and the disciples discuss the complexity of this challenge a bit more.

When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” He said to them, “This kind can come out only through prayer.” (Mark 9:28-29)

At first glance, this seems like it’s raising the white flag of surrender to a condition beyond human help. It’s so difficult, we can only pray about it, hoping for some miraculous change to take place. In many situations, that is exactly what it feels like, which is why, when there is no clear and evident change, all we can do is pray. We’ve exhausted our resources and abilities, so prayer is what you turn to when you can do nothing else.

Yet, this is not as much of defeatist response as we might think. Prayer, when it is done sincerely and thoughtfully, is far more effective than we realize; it changes our perspective on very complex situations that refuse to improve toward the better. First, entering into a period of reflection, meditation, and engagement with God, prayer decompresses us from the stress and angst that overwhelms us when we fear someone or something is hopeless. We’re able to dial it back emotionally so we can regain our footing and our focus and recapture our empathy and compassion for those suffering.

Second, prayer helps us to concentrate on the circumstances and ignite our imaginations to new possibilities. The Spirit of God engages us through our consciences and imaginations to “re-imagine” the person and the situation from one of utter futility and as an object of our frustration to one who is humanized and worthy of our love and care. In doing that, we are able to recover energy and desire to find the help and support this person and situation calls for.

Third, prayer also opens us up to the “holy coincidences” and unexpected synchronicities of life which occur all the time, but that we are often unable to appreciate because we’ve become too jaded, too burdened,

or too discouraged by the obstacles we face that we're blind to subtle graces that exist. Often the influences of the divine Spirit and other things come to bear that lead to a meaningful change in the circumstances that have appeared otherwise intractable. What this means is, God works in ways we often don't see and prayer allows us to use our "real" eyes to realize it. We notice things that give us hope.

One more thing. In virtually every religious tradition, prayer has always been a private practice; but in Christianity, intercessory prayer is also a collective ministry, and has been down through the ages. Prayer has been our spiritual community's response to bridge social isolation and bring those on the margins back into the center of life and into the realm of our concern. By doing so, the "illness" becomes "wellness," because the "I" is replaced by the "We." There's a remarkable collective power that we are able to tap into.

Communal care for those with conflicted souls is a ministry of healing to each person and situation in their own way. It's brought home profoundly in this story when it was only Christ who could heal this young man. Yet, where was Christ in the resurrected reality? Christ was in the *community of believers*—the Body of Christ—those who represented the spirit of Christ in the flesh in the world. Bringing those who are isolated from community life because of their conditions and circumstances through this ministry of prayer is a powerful way of confirming Christ's healing presence in their lives. With a quantum sense of the universe and reality, this ministry of prayer is far more profound and effective than we can even grasp or imagine! The moment we think of someone, a quantum change occurs!

As I've thought about this topic over the past week, when I said earlier that it often seems as if the resources of faith are inadequate or impotent in the face of so many situations that appear "impossible" to remedy, I realize it's because we often underestimate what we can do to inspire hope and healing. Prayer and care are not impotent acts of love.

Our faith isn't merely believing in someone or something that existed thousands of years ago, whose stories we continue to pass along from generation to generation. *Faith is the focus and spiritual power we have to draw upon the divine Presence in every moment to enlighten us, to empower us, and to engage us in the deepest elements of our existence as spiritual beings on a human journey.* Even when the laws of Nature don't bend to our desire or will to fix every situation we face, the essence of life isn't reduced or obstructed by human flesh and its limitations—it still goes on with remarkable intensity and vitality on some level. It is found in the spirit that draws from that which is eternal and able to sustain our hope and wellbeing, individually and collectively. "Illness" becomes "wellness" when we replace the "I" with the "We" of supportive love and care from friends, both present and eternal, as we carry on through life.

For me, this is the best theological meaning behind a sense of reconciliation with God we receive through grace that transforms our lives and our world—a reconciliation we find through Christ. God reconciles our conflicted souls so that we may find our peace once again—a peace supported and sustained by that which is holy and eternal and more lasting than the temporal state we're presently in. For those who suffer along the margins of life because of conditions they cannot control, they need that sense of reconciliation—a ministry of reconciliation we offer as the Body of Christ—with a hope that will sustain them, knowing they will not be left

alone to fight the demons of their existence. We offer the gift we all have all received: the grace to live a life made well by the love of God expressed through the Spirit and the Body of Christ.

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