

"Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see" This passage from today's gospel may sound familiar to you, especially if you recall a very similar phrase from last week's reading, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

In my experience, when someone repeats themselves, it is a sign that they feel what they are saying is extremely important and they want to make sure that what they are saying is heard. So what could be considered so important that our lectionary places the same passage, from two different gospels, in the readings on two consecutive weeks? I would suggest that Jesus is highlighting his physical wounds for his disciples because he wants them to not turn away from the suffering he has endured, but instead to look directly at it and to embrace it.

If you think about it, this would be a difficult task for most. While many of us do often "rubber neck" when we pass an accident on the road, or find ourselves glued to our television sets when the cable news channels are trumpeting "breaking news updates" of the most recent calamity to strike our world, many people are not comfortable with suffering. While we may make a financial donation or offer the tried and true "thoughts and prayers" most find it easier to do a quick peek and then to head on, avoiding that which we judge to be "not nice".

In the world of the clinical social worker however, things are different, as social workers are often found diving right in to embrace the suffering that exists every day in our world. In fact, a common question people often ask me and other social workers is "How can you do what you do?" For a long time I didn't have a good answer for this question.

When I was younger, I watched my parents and grandparents as they went about their lives, serving others in our community. Their example showed me that serving others was what I should be doing too. At first I thought that meant teaching, but in the classroom I began to feel that there was "more" I could do for my students when they faced adversity, and so I worked to become a clinical social worker. Over the years since, I have worked with children and their families, and as a hospice and palliative care social worker, continuing to follow the example set by people I valued and respected.

Due to my experience in working with kids and families, I was asked at one point to help out with the youth of St. Pauls, and this has become one of the ministries I enjoy taking part in here. This ministry has also helped me to become more aware of myself and the influences on my choice of career. I remember a few years ago, while Sarah Nyhan and I were helping members of the Confirm non Conform group find bible verses that meant something to them as a part of their preparation for confirmation, I came across a bible verse, myself, Luke 12:48, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required", this has meant a lot to me, helping to open my eyes and my mind. Thinking even more

about this, I started to realize how God has indeed been working with and through me as a social worker, and how he gives me the strength, courage and awareness to continue to face and embrace suffering.

When I am confronted with suffering, God helps me to know what to say and when to say it. Last week, I sat with a man as he watched his wife of 45 years slip away. When I asked “how are you?” this man, a stoic retired police officer, insisted “I’m good” and “I’m going to be ok”. In the past this gentleman had never been willing to go further than that in disclosing his emotions. However, that morning, a feeling stirred in me, and something told me to dig deeper. Looking at him, I asked, quietly and directly, “so how are you really?” When he turned and looked at me, for the first time I could see tears in his eyes as he admitted “I don’t know what I am going to do when I go to bed and realize that she isn’t there.” I believe that God knew the hurt that was in this gentleman’s heart, and pushed me to challenge him, to give him an opening so he could express what he was feeling instead of keeping it bottled up the way he’d so often done before.

God not only helps me to say what I should, God also surrounds me with like minded individuals and puts me in a position where we can together alleviate someone’s pain.

Claire was a hospice patient in a local nursing home who, in early December of last year, knew that she was dying and was not going to make it to Christmas. Her nurse told our Hospice team that Claire had confided in her that her last wish was to watch her granddaughter enjoy Christmas. So we immediately made a decision. Each member of our team, including the staff of the nursing home, used their individual talents to put together a Christmas holiday party complete with carols, food, presents and Santa Claus for Claire and her family so that they could share a wonderful and special last Christmas together.

When Claire died only a couple of days after their party and two weeks before Christmas, her son tearfully admitted to me that they had experienced the best Christmas they had ever had. I felt blessed to have been able to, in a small way, help to make one of Claire’s last days special for her. I know that this is because God has helped me to develop connections with people, like me, who are willing to face challenging and emotional situations for the benefit of our clients.

God is also present when difficult circumstances arise. While I was part of an intensive program with court ordered adolescents, I worked with Susan. Susan was a fourteen year old girl whose mother had no interest in being a mother to a teenager, and therefore pushed her away. Unfortunately, while her alcoholic and drug addicted father really wanted to take care of her, it quickly became very clear to everyone working with this family that he could barely take care of himself.—So it was determined that Susan would need to enter the foster care system while he received treatment for his addiction. It was then that God produced a husband and wife who I consider to be angels. Not only did these foster parents take extraordinary care of Susan during her time with them, they also worked tirelessly to support what came to be a successful reunification with her father.

While I feel that God supports me in embracing the suffering of others, I am truly amazed at how God also helps struggling individuals to support others even while they themselves are hurting. Once a

month, I co-facilitate a group for children who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Currently, the members of our group range in age between six and seventeen years old, and each of them has lost a parent or grandparent. While my co-facilitators and I support these children as they work through their personal grief, I am truly humbled and amazed at how they connect and support each other, in ways that we as facilitators could never do. I believe that their ability to show love and concern for others while dealing with their own grief is a sign of the Holy Spirit's supportive presence among them.

While I would love to say that every family situation or patient encounter that I have works well and that I always say the right thing at just the right time, I cannot. However, it is possible to take comfort from Peter's words in today's reading from Acts, "I know that you acted in ignorance" and "Repent therefore and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out". God is ok with us making mistakes, and believe me, I've made some. But instead of suggesting that we should be moping, giving up and walking away, God instead wants us to let him pick us up, help us dust ourselves off and get back into it.

God has also opened my mind and helped me cope when I have been forced to face my own suffering. Several years ago, my Nana, Hazel Richmond, was a resident at Havenwood. For the last few years of her life, she was a resident in their health services wing. Being the family member that lived the closest, and a dutiful grandson, I would visit her, usually at least once weekly.

One day, as her time on earth grew short, she told me about another visitor she had had, explaining how a man would come into her room in the late evening and sit in a chair by her bed. She said that they never spoke, but that he just sat there and kept her company.

She told me that she didn't know who he was, but insisted that she wasn't afraid of him, telling me that he was "a nice and caring young man".

When I asked the staff of the facility about the young man, wanting to thank him for providing her company in the evening, they insisted that they had no idea what I was talking about. I was confused, but I told myself that they worked on different shifts, and could not know who I was talking about.

This made sense to me at the time and I moved on, but after she died, I found myself spending a lot of time thinking about my grandmother's visitor. As I did, I began to look at the situation from a different point of view. I now believe that God was present for my grandmother in her last days and weeks.

I cannot claim to know what it felt like for my Grandmother, knowing that her end of life was near, and although I pray that it is not the case, I have sometimes wondered if she may have been scared of what was to come, or perhaps she was aware of the anxiety that her dutiful grandson was feeling as she declined and that caused her angst.

In my heart, I now have come to believe that the man that sat with my Grandmother those nights was an Angel. I believe God knew what she was feeling and sent him to be sure that she would not be afraid as she faced the end of her life and to assure her that there was a place in heaven for her.

Yes, God supports me as I seek to support those coping with their own trials, but I feel God's presence elsewhere as well. As a member of this parish, in my time with the youth of St. Pauls, among my family

and friends, and even when I am alone, out for a bike ride or a walk in the natural world, God travels with me always. And now, knowing this, I have an answer when people ask me that question, “how can you do what you do?” My answer now has to be “how can I not?”

I would like to conclude with a blessing that has been important to me since I first heard Bishop Gene give it at a service many years ago. It not only pertains to me as a social worker, but a person in general.

A Franciscan Blessing

May God bless you with a restless ***discomfort***

about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,

so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy ***anger***

at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,

so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of ***tears***

to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish,

so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough ***foolishness***

to believe that you really can make a difference in this world,

so that you are able, with God’s grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.