

OPUCC

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When Life Gives You Lemons...

I was driving home from the airport this past Monday in the sort of haze that can only happen after having been through a crisis with one's family. It was late in the evening about eleven o'clock, and I was keeping my eyes squarely on the road ahead so as not to be distracted, when I heard this story on the radio. I don't remember the name of the program, I don't really remember what the program was about, but I do recall it was a Jewish Rabbi who told the story. He started by saying, "There is a parable that comes from the Far East, I have heard it told with a couple of different endings." It was one of those Christian radio stations that can turn kind of freaky in the middle of the night-so I was about to switch the station, but his voice was strangely comforting and so I listened on.

"The story goes that there was a woman who tragically lost her only son, overcome with grief she went to the temple and asked the Elder what to do. She asked if there was any way to bring her son back to life? The Elder thought for a long while and then he spoke, 'Go to the surrounding houses in the village and search for the house that can give you one mustard seed.' 'One mustard seed, that doesn't seem so hard,' the woman replied but the Elder continued, 'many houses will possess a mustard seed, this is true, but the mustard seed you must bring back- is to be from a house that has never known sorrow.'

The woman set out, each time she knocked on a door and told the people who answered what had happened to her, that she was in search of a mustard seed from a house that had never known sorrow-the family would welcome her in. They would sit together and share with her their own stories of loss and grief, of sadness and pain. The woman realized the Elder of the temple was right; there were many houses with mustard seeds to share, but not one from a house that had never known sorrow.

The first ending to the story is that the woman returned to the Elder and told him what she had learned, and in doing so she realized that nothing could bring her son back to her- so she let him go.

The second ending is that the woman realized in visiting with people, that there were sorrows in her community far deeper than her own and so she never returned to the Elder, but instead vowed to spend the rest of her life helping others to heal.”

As I was hurriedly packing to make an unexpected trip home to my parents last week, I threw a bunch of random things into my suitcase and thinking I might get some work done while I was there, I threw in a book I’ve been thinking about using for Advent this year. It is Joyce Rupp’s latest publication. When I arrived in Santa Rosa I put it up on the nightstand next to the bed thinking, “that was silly, given what is going on here, I doubt there’ll be much time for planning events in December.”

What was going on there? That’s the million-dollar question. I went home because early in the week I received a call from my parents telling me that my brother was in bad shape. He was going through withdrawals from what they had been told was a drug called speed. The next time they called they had been to see him and found out a little more information. They found out Thad had decided to quit cold turkey an addiction to Crystal Meth, which had been going on for two years.

My mother assured me that everything would be fine, that they would visit him every day and bring him soup. “Today was a better day” she said, “today he stood up, and he says he’s only smoking marijuana to help curb his nausea.” In that moment I realized my parents had no idea what they were dealing with, and

that while my knowledge of Meth was limited, I knew enough to know that my family needed help.

On Wednesday, my first day home, my Father and I spend hours getting referrals and setting up appointments with drug rehabilitation centers both day and residential treatment facilities. If you have ever tried to do this, you know that it can be overwhelming to open the phone book in search of these resources, but I quickly learned that there are county run/low cost recovery facilities in every state across the US, as well as countless private facilities ranging anywhere from \$8,000.00 up.

Additionally, we were lucky enough to find a therapist with a background in chemical dependency and family systems that would be willing to see us the next day. My Dad invited his good friend and Choir Director over to share with us the story of his brother who died several years ago from an addiction to alcohol. Doug was adamant that Thad needed to be in a treatment program and he felt, left untreated, this addiction would kill him sooner than later.

Thursday morning, I went with my Mom and Dad to interview three treatment facilities. At each of them we were met by people who themselves had once been addicted either to alcohol or drugs. They were generous in sharing their knowledge, each one repeated the same key points; "Addiction is a disease, it's hereditary, it's progressive, and it will not cure itself." They were clear that the only effective way to heal addiction is through clinical and behavioral modification-they all recommended a thirty to ninety day live in program, complete with a transition phase, and two years of follow up treatment, as relapse is most common in the first two years.

They pointed out that a users emotional maturity can be stunted by addiction, and that it's likely when someone starts using drugs or alcohol with regularity his or her development becomes frozen in time. My brother has been smoking pot regularly since he was nineteen years old- he is now forty-two.

They taught us that an addict wants the object of addiction more than anything else, more than a job, school, a house, car, even more than relationships with friends and family. This was important to hear because it is easy to believe that if the addicted person just loved you enough they would get some help- not true- more often than not addiction overrides relationships. They were also intentional about telling us that an addict cannot be forced into recovery and that treatment won't do any good unless the person is willing to receive it.

When we met with the therapist later that same day, she prepared us for the likelihood that Thad might refuse help. She said that despite what looks to an outside eye like a desperate situation, the addicted person might very well not see the need for treatment. She said some people hit rock bottom, get out a shovel, and keep on digging. Regardless of his decision, she encouraged us to continue to do our work, and to learn how best to be in relationship with an addicted person. We learned about setting limits and sticking to them (not as easy as it sounds), about watching for signs of manipulation because as the therapist pointed out, addicts are very smart- they know just what to say to get their needs met. And finally, we learned that we did not cause Thad's addiction, we cannot solve his addiction, and the only people we can really change are ourselves.

It was an exhausting day, Thursday night I picked up Joyce Rupp's book- Its title is, "Your Sorrow is My Sorrow: Hope and Strength in Times of Suffering." To my surprise I found it to be helpful reading in the midst of all of that was going on. In the first chapter I was reminded of the time when Mary and Joseph are said to have taken Jesus to the Temple to be blest by the Elders as was customary according to Jewish Law.<sup>i</sup>

Even though Mary thought she had gotten through the hardest part with Jesus- she is reminded otherwise by a man named Simeon.

Simeon holds Jesus tenderly in his arms and says to his young mother, "This child will face great opposition. He will not be accepted by those who have the power to destroy him. This child will pay a heavy price for his goodness. And you, Mary, your hurt will be so profound, you will feel as though your heart was sliced through with a sharp sword."<sup>1</sup> I didn't read much more than that-I put the book down and went to sleep.

On Friday morning we went to see my brother, it was an intervention of sorts, I guess. I have always known my mother's love for my brother to be profound, but for the first time I recognized in her the suffering of Mary. There we stood on my brother's front porch, the porch of the house from which he has been evicted and has had his electricity turned off owing \$4000.00 to the electric company, there on the porch the three of us stood and beseeched my brother to get the help we feel he so desperately needs if he is to return to a happy, healthy life. I watched my mother's knees give way as she fell to the dusty ground in tears when Thad refused our offer.

Joyce Rupp asks in her book who are the Simeons in our lives-the bearers of seemingly unbearable truth? I am sure you have known a few. But there is another character in the story of Jesus at the temple her name is Anna. Just after Simeon delivers his painful news to Mary and Joseph, Anna- a prophetess-sits down next to Mary and takes her hand. It is said that Anna had "the face of one who had grown very close to God."<sup>2</sup> She was a reassuring presence to Mary and Joseph that day. She did not deny the pain they were feeling, she only assured them that they could endure what was and what would be.

I did not see my brother again that visit, but I did see the people who will become Anna's to my parents. As the word traveled, people who know and love my family well, showed up to the house to share their own stories. Stories of

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<sup>1</sup> Your Sorrow is My Sorrow, Joyce Rupp. The Crossroad Publishing Company, NY. Page 31.

<sup>2</sup> Your Sorrow is My Sorrow, Joyce Rupp. The Crossroad Publishing Company, NY. Page 32.

addicted children, spouses, parents, stories of gut wrenching pain and stories of healing.

When I went to California, my purpose was twofold, it was to help my parents and myself become more educated and to find the support we will need for this particular journey, and it was to offer my brother the same.

This story does not have a happy ending yet... it may never have a happy ending, but so far I have learned much that is invaluable.

I learned for myself that there is not one single house that is free from having been touched by sorrow, I learned that in God we are always met by a heart that has known heart ache, I learned that where there are Simeons there are also Annas and perhaps the most importantly, I learned that the best we can do when it seems like there is nothing we can do-is help each other heal.

Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 2:21-40 (MSG)

<sup>21</sup> When the eighth day arrived, the day of circumcision, the child was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived. <sup>22</sup> Then when the days stipulated by Moses for purification were complete, they took him up to Jerusalem to offer him to God <sup>23</sup> as commanded in God's Law: "Every male who opens the womb shall be a holy offering to God," <sup>24</sup> and also to sacrifice the "pair of doves or two young pigeons" prescribed in God's Law. <sup>25</sup> In Jerusalem at the time, there was a man, Simeon by name, a good man, a man who lived in the prayerful expectancy of help for Israel. And the Holy Spirit was on him. <sup>26</sup> The Holy Spirit had shown him that he would see the Messiah of God before he died. <sup>27</sup> Led by the Spirit, he entered the Temple. As the parents of the child Jesus brought him in to carry out the rituals of the Law, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him into his arms and blessed God: <sup>29</sup> God, you can now release your servant; release me in peace as you promised. <sup>30</sup> With my own eyes I've seen your salvation; <sup>31</sup> it's now out in the open for everyone to see: <sup>32</sup> A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations, and of glory for your people Israel. <sup>33</sup> Jesus' father and mother were speechless with surprise at these words. <sup>34</sup> Simeon went on to bless them, and said to Mary his mother, This child marks both the failure and the recovery of many in Israel, A figure misunderstood and contradicted— <sup>35</sup> the pain of a sword-thrust through you— But the rejection will force honesty, as God reveals who they really are. <sup>36</sup> Anna the prophetess was also there, a daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher. She was by now a very old woman. She had been married seven years <sup>37</sup> and a widow for eighty-four. She never left the Temple area, worshiping night and day with her fastings and prayers. <sup>38</sup> At the very time Simeon was praying, she showed up, broke into an anthem of praise to God, and talked about the child to all who were waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem. <sup>39</sup> When they finished everything required by God in the Law, they returned to Galilee and their own town, Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> There the child grew strong in body and wise in spirit. And the grace of God was on him.