

I read this week that STARBUCKS is planning on selling beer and wine. Apparently it's getting difficult to sell sober people a \$12 cup of coffee.

When you're dead, you don't know you're dead. The pain is felt by others.

The same thing happens when you're stupid.

And finally, an older gentleman asked his daughter for her phone book. She laughed at him and called him a dinosaur. She lent him her phone.

Now the spider is dead, the i-phone is broken, and the daughter is furious.

OK, down to business. Mark's gospel has been reporting the early days of Jesus' public ministry. In a handful of moments, we watch Him interact with so many people with love and compassion that we have to ask ourselves: How did He do it? Mark tells us Jesus took time to be with God, to rest, to pray, to be alone. His was a work that so connected with people that everyone wanted a piece of His life. It was prayer that gave Jesus His strength, His direction, and His compassion. That connection with His Father was what guided His entire life.

We need this no less in our own overly busy lives. We all need a 'deserted place' to reconnect with God and the things of the heart. That 'deserted place' may be a physical space – a walk in the woods, a chair in a quiet room – or a set-aside time (first thing in the morning, a few minutes after lunch, or driving to and from work) – wherever and whenever we can escape the clamor of the marketplace and the tyranny of our schedules to experience the peace of being alone with God.

Franciscan Sister Maria Jose Hobday recounts this story from her childhood in Colorado; I have questions about the parenting technique, but the meaning of the story is pure gold.

"One summer Saturday morning when I was 12, I was waiting for my friend Juanita to come over. We had planned a morning together, and she was quite late. I was fretting and complaining and generally making a nuisance of myself. In fact, I was becoming rather obnoxious to everyone else in the house. Finally, my father said to me, 'Get a book, a blanket, and an apple, and get into the car!' I wanted to know why, but he only repeated the order. So I obeyed.

"My father drove me about 8 miles from home to a canyon area, and said, 'Now get out. We cannot stand you any longer at home! You aren't fit to live with. Just stay out here by yourself today until you understand how to act. I'll come back for you this evening.'

"I got out, angry, frustrated, and defiant. The nerve of him! I thought immediately of walking home; eight miles was no distance at all for me. Then the thought of meeting my father when I got there took hold, and I changed my mind. I cried and threw the book, apple, and blanket over the canyon ledge. I had been dumped and I was furious. But it is hard to keep up a good rebellious cry with no audience, so finally there was nothing to do but face up to the day alone.

"I sat on the rim, kicking the dirt and trying to get control of myself. After a couple of hours, as noon approached, I began to get hungry. I located the apple and climbed down to retrieve it – as well as the book and the blanket. I climbed back up, and as I came over the top, I noticed a pinon tree. It was lovely and full. I spread the blanket in the shade, put the book under my head, and began to eat the apple.

"I was aware of a change of attitude. As I looked through the branches into the sky, a great sense of peace and beauty came to me. The clouds sat in still puffs, the blue was endless, and I began to take in their spaciousness. I thought about the way I had acted, and why Daddy had treated me so harshly. Understanding began to come, and I became more objective about my behavior. I found myself getting in touch with my feelings -- and the world around me.....I became aware of being a part of it all, and I found myself thinking of God. I wanted harmony. I wanted to hold the feeling of mystery. I wanted to be a better person. It was a prayerful time, a time of deep silence....

"By the time my father came to get me, I was restored. Daddy did not press me about the day. He asked no questions, and I gave him no answers. But I was different, and we both knew it. My father had dumped me into solitude and had challenged me to grow. Before I got out of the car, I thanked him. And from then on, especially during the summers, I would take a day to go off alone. I loved those times of solitude, of contemplation, of prayer. I loved the person, the world, the God I had met that day. This habit of seeking solitude has stayed with me all these years." (From *STORIES OF AWE AND ABUNDANCE* by Sister Maria Jose Hobday). Prayer not only connects us to God – it connects us more deeply to ourselves. It reminds us that the world does not revolve around us. Jesus knew this – and drew strength from His prayer. So do we.

And my second of only 2 points. The lectionary pairs this gospel with a small portion of the Book of Job. We all know that the Book of Job struggles with the question of suffering and evil. It gives no easy answers. But what it does do, is give us a story, which is what prayer did for Jesus, and the gospels and our faith gives to us. How so? And why is this important?

In his book, *LIVING BETWEEN WORLDS*, James Hollis offers a piece of wit that carries more depth than is first evident. A therapist says to a client, *I cannot solve your problem, but I can give you a more compelling story for your misery*. That's more than a wisecrack. Whether we feel good or bad about ourselves is often predicated on what kind of story we understand ourselves as living within.

A Canadian priest, Pierre Olivier Tremblay once gave a talk with words to this effect: "I am a chaplain at a university, working with young college students. They are full of life, dreams, and energy; sadly, however, they are mostly devoid of hope – because THEY HAVE NO META-NARRATIVE. They suffer a lot because they do not have a bigger story within which to understand themselves and make more sense of their own story. Their own stories, precious though they are, are too small and individualistic to give them much to draw on when pain and heartache and loss beset them. They need a bigger story within which to situate themselves, a meta-narrative. While this won't necessarily take away their pain and heartaches and loss, it would give them something bigger within which to understand their suffering.

I think of my parents and the faith that helped sustain them and their generation. They had a meta-narrative, a 'framing story,' – the Christian story of salvation history and how, in that story, at the very beginning of history, Adam and Eve committed an 'original sin' that has ever since skewed reality so as to leave us with the impossibility of ever attaining the full symphony in this life. When their lives got hard, as is the case with all of us, they had a religious perspective as to why they were frustrated and in pain. They understood themselves to be born into a flawed world, and with a flawed nature. Hence, their prayer found words in the *SALVE REGINA*, prayed at the end of the rosary, "Hail! Holy Queen! Mother of Mercy, hail! Our life, our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears...." We prayed this every night after dinner as a family at the end of our rosary. We grew up knowing that life wasn't going to be perfect, that it would contain suffering, but that it had a context – and that context was redemption. GOD was with us through it all.

Today folks might frown on this and see it as unhealthy and morbid, but that narrative -- that we are children of Adam and Eve -- helped give some explanation and meaning to all the shortcomings in our lives. While it didn't take away our pain, it helped give dignity to our miseries. Today I see many sincere parents trying in new ways to give a bigger narrative to their young children through stories like THE LION KING. That might indeed be helpful for young children, but as Pierre Olivier Tremblay points out, eventually a much bigger and more compelling narrative is needed. The Book of Job is part of that larger narrative.

The story within which we frame our pain makes all the difference in the world vis-à-vis how we cope with that pain. So for example, the world's framing story tells us that the purpose of life for individuals or nations is to accumulate an abundance of possessions and to experience the maximum amount of pleasure during the maximum number of minutes of our short lives. Which then tells us that we have little reason to manage our consumption. We need not worry about anyone else -- or future generations, because it's all about me. And the world's story also tells us that we are in life-and-death competition with each other -- which then tells us that we have little reason to seek reconciliation and collaboration and nonviolent resolutions to our conflicts. But if we follow the Jesus story, the Biblical story, we realize that we are free and responsible creatures in a creation made by a good, wise, and loving God, and that our Creator wants us to pursue virtue, collaboration, peace, and mutual care for one another and all living creatures, and that our lives have profound meaning -- in fact, ETERNAL meaning. And then our society takes a radically different direction, and our world becomes a very different place.

When we believe in a deep way that life is good, God is good, and humanity is good, we do exciting and imaginative things because we are confident that we are part of a storyline that is going somewhere good. As Christians, we have the opportunity to live the story given to us at the very beginning--in Genesis 1 -- that creation is "good," even "very good," and that it is our vocation to nurture and grow such goodness wherever we can. (adapted from Richard Rohr, posting of Jan 2024)

A bigger story brings us the dignity that helps us to differentiate meaning from happiness. We invariably confuse the 2. What we need to seek in life is meaning, not happiness. Happiness (as we generally understand it) can never be pursued because it is always a byproduct of something else. Moreover, happiness is ephemeral and episodic; it comes and goes. Meaning is abiding and can co-exist with pain and suffering. I doubt that Jesus was happy as He hung dying on the cross, but I suspect that inside of all that pain, He was experiencing deep meaning, perhaps the deepest meaning of all. Not incidentally, He found this deepest of all meaning because He understood Himself as being inside the deepest of all stories, the story of human redemption.

At the end of the day, faith, religion, community, friendship, and therapy, cannot take away our problems. Most times, there isn't any solution; a problem must be lived through. As Gabriel Marcel famously put it, life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved. The story within which we frame our pain is the key to turning problem into mystery.

Art Schopenhauer once wrote that all pain can be borne if it can be shared. The sharing he was referring to doesn't just have to do with friendship, community, and intimacy. It also has to do with story. Pain can be born more generatively when it finds itself inside a larger story than our own, when it shares a meta-narrative, a horizon wide enough to dwarf our innate human loneliness. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 8 November 2021)

Every Sunday we hear more bits of this story when we come to Mass. I'm grateful to have been given this large story of a loving and merciful God by my parents, our Catholic faith and Church. May it be a blessing to us all. Amen.

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