

Stopping the Car

9:11 But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead words to worship the living God!

Sometimes a good father gives you grief. Sometimes even the best dad makes you suffer a little bit.

Dr. Richard Selzer is a surgeon and writer who taught at Yale for decades. His own father was a doctor, too. He was a simple, small town doctor who took care of people in a place small enough where everybody knew everybody. Or so you'd think. One day Selzer and his brother were poking around in the basement. They were just boys, maybe 9 or 10. And they found a chest, he says it looked just like a pirate chest. His brother worked on the lock, until he managed to get it undone. And then, they held their breath as he cracked it open. And what they found inside absolutely shocked them to the core. Inside the chest were bones- the bleached white bones of a human skeleton. No two, for two skulls with empty eye sockets stared out at them grinning at them hideously.

Immediately, his brother shut it. What are we going to do? They both panicked. They knew immediately what had happened. Obviously, their father at some point accidentally killed two of his patients. But rather than face the authorities he wound up hiding their bodies in the basement instead. And right then and there they swore not to

tell a word to anybody, knowing that if they did, the police would come and haul their father away probably forever.

Well, keeping a secret like this is easier said than done. At first they just tried avoiding him, but that was pretty hard. And one night, when he was carving a turkey, they just couldn't help but stare at his hands holding that knife. And the looks they must have had on their faces. Finally, he confronted them saying, "All right, out with it. Out with whatever has been making you two mope around for the past couple of weeks or I'll give you the thrashing you so richly deserve." And so, they told him. "Dad, we know." Is all they said. With a serious look he stared at them and sat down. "So you know?" he asked. They nodded. "What do you know?" They said, "We know about the chest. We know about," they paused, "the bodies." Looking like he was going to be sick, like all the wind was knocked out of him their father gasped. Looking down, he said, "So you finally know." And with tears and tears the boys told him they swore never to tell anyone and that his secret was safe with them. Finally, after sitting together for a few minutes, they agreed to act natural and the best way to do that was to eat.

About two weeks later Selzer heard his father laughing hysterically in another room when his uncle came to visit. And he overheard his father tell his brother how the boys found his two skeletons from med school and how they thought he had killed some of his patients. And then he bitterly remembers them laughing and laughing for a painfully long time.

Sometimes a good father gives you grief. They do.

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The community addressed by the letter of Hebrews knew about grief. The letter of Hebrews is a challenging letter. We don't know that much about it, for one thing- we don't know when it was written or where the community was located. We don't know who wrote it. Hebrews is one of those books we know more about what we don't know, than what we do know.

One of the only things we do know for certain since it comes from the letter itself- we know the community the letter is written to is suffering. We know they are tired and drooping, with many of them right on the edge of falling away from the faith. We know from the letter that the community faces persecution, and I suspect they were beginning to wonder if God was a little bit like Richard Selzer's father- was God just allowing them to suffer without relieving it, or maybe even chuckling about it?

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I have to admit that I feel this way too sometimes. Right now you can't turn on the news without seeing birds covered in oil or pictures of a smiling little boy in glasses who should be home today but isn't and wonder just what IS God doing, anyway? Of course for some of us it's more personal- some of us are out of work or have family that are. Some of us know what it is to love someone and not be loved back, or know what it is to love someone and then have that person taken away from us before we were ready. Others of us have been touched by disease, and even if you have a clean bill of health now every time you feel something, a little pain, you tell yourself it's nothing, but in the back of your mind you're wondering if maybe it's something more. Whatever it is, everyone here knows in some part of their lives that not all is well, and you can't help but wonder now and again where God is in the midst of it all.



And this is exactly what the letter of Hebrews is about. Unlike the Psalms which says appearances to the contrary God really is in control of the suffering of the world and is working to put an end to it, or the great epic tradition of the Old Testament that says God is alleviating suffering by blessing Abram and his family to be a blessing, or the prophets who say suffering is caused by injustice and we need to shape up- unlike any of these, the letter of Hebrews says something different about suffering, more strange, really. Hebrews says God heals our suffering only by suffering with us. Hebrews says God heals our suffering by suffering, too.

The dominant image in Hebrews is Christ being like a high priest. Only he's a very strange high priest. See, the high priest makes sacrifice on behalf of himself and the people. But the way he does this is by offering an animal. Christ, the letter of Hebrews says, also offers sacrifices- except instead of an animal, he offers himself, he offers his own blood.

Now I've said before I've never really felt comfortable with the emphasis the church sometimes puts on the blood of Christ. Maybe it's because I grew up in Texas and my Baptist friends would sing hymns like There's a Fountain of Blood and There's Power in the Blood, hymns you will never find in a Presbyterian hymnal. Presbyterians as a rule are kind of squeamish about blood- Christ's blood or anyone else's for that matter. The other day I was visiting someone at Good Sam up in Portland, and I saw a sign that pointed the way to bloodless surgery, and I thought- perfect. Presbyterians now have a place to go for surgery- all the healing, none of the goo.

Part of our discomfort is legitimate. We've seen people point to Christ's suffering and blood in ways that manipulative, and rather than healing us it does just the opposite. My best friend and neighbor in seminary, John, he worked as an intern up at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. One Friday afternoon I saw him, and he just looked upset. I asked him about it, and he said he was going on retreat that weekend with the young adults from the church. I was like, yeah, going away to a fancy retreat center would be a reason for anyone to be grumpy. After glaring at me, he said the reason was this other intern he was working with. She had this idea for what she wanted them all to do, and no matter what he said, she would not relent. Her idea, and they actually did this- on the final night of the retreat they were all supposed to think about their sins and write them down on these little slips of paper they were given. They were just supposed to immerse themselves in this dark cesspool of their brokenness. And then, after this feel good time was over, everyone was supposed to go up and literally nail their sins to the cross in order for them to understand their own complicity, their own participation in Christ's death. I told him they should have just skipped the cross bit and hit everyone on the nose with a rolled up newspaper and said, "Bad dog, bad dog!" I felt like I needed a shower after hearing that.

This kind of emphasis on the blood- well it's like we're trying to keep Jesus up there on that cross and never let him off. It's not healing our pain, it's wallowing in it.

But this isn't what Hebrews is getting at when it talks about Christ's suffering and his blood. See, the point in Hebrews isn't on the suffering per se. Hebrews doesn't dwell on the crucifixion. And there's certainly no sense that somehow it's all our fault. No, the

point about Christ's suffering is that Christ suffers in the SAME WAY that we do. In our first reading we heard that Christ is tested in every way that we are, and because of this, because he enters into our condition, because of this he can help.

And when Christ enters the temple to offer sacrifice, he doesn't bring some animal to sacrifice in our place. He brings himself. He brings himself. And he offers his own blood- normal, human blood that courses through our veins the same as his.

And somehow, Hebrews says, somehow- just the fact that he feels what we feel. Somehow knowing we're not alone in our suffering- somehow this helps.

A few years after the med school skeleton incident, Richard Selzer writes about going on car trips and how he would invariably become car sick. And he writes about how frustrated his father would be at this- how his father would growl at him and tell him it was all in his mind. But no matter what his father would say, any time they got in the car for a trip of any length, they all knew exactly what would happen. He writes:

“You have never known true agony until you have struggled to contain an attack of *mal de voiture* (car sickness). There is the first skidding shudder of the stomach, the tell tale yawn, the gathering of saliva, the fullness of the abdomen that insists that belt and clothing be loosened and held free of the skin...then there comes a moment when resolve snaps...and you grow cold, turn green. You sweat. Soon you will die. And all the while there is the guilt laced with shame that you have spoiled the car ride. You are a killjoy, a blight.

Then comes the whispered command from your lips: “Stop the car.”...Wordless now you slip from the car to slump against the nearest tree, a rock, the ground...[And

then, in spite of what he had said before] only Father would dismount, heaving himself from behind the wheel to stand behind me, one hand gently supporting my forehead, the other arm looped about my body, holding me upright.

And when at last I was finished, with my head all laden with rue, I was led back to the Iron Maiden. “Have a good puke?” said my brother Billy. He had the stomach of a whirling dervish. “I do not like that word,” said Mother. “He’s got throw-up on his sleeve,” insisted Billy. “It stinks.” “I do not like THAT word either,” said Mother. At which point Father would reach one arm into the back seat and give Billy a wallop. And then, “Stop the car again, please,” I would whimper. (p. 196) And he always knew that no matter what, his dad would pull over and, without a word of reproach, get out, and support his head and cradle his body as often as he would need.

And then he knew that while a good father may give us grief from time to time- the best ones also suffer through it with us, too. Suffering with is part of what it means to be a father I believe.

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Two years ago this August I learned about this the hard way when Ella wound up at Emmanuel. For a week Melissa had worried and said El wasn’t getting better, and I just kept on saying she’ll be fine. She’ll be fine. And of course she wasn’t.

And there just aren’t words, are there, to describe what it is to sit in a room where your one year old is sedated and there’s nothing to do but to sit and watch her little body filled with tubes that shouldn’t be there.

And during that time do you know who taught me the most about being a good father- a father who suffers with? You did. You did.

See, Melissa would take the day shift while I'd take Will to school and catch up on work and sleep, and then I'd take the night shift. About the only thing I was capable of doing for those two weeks was cobbling together something for worship.

And what I will always remember, always remember, is at the end of worship on that second Sunday, with Ella still in the hospital, when I came out to offer the benediction, Charlie Brown stood up and motioned me to be quiet, and I nervously wondered what on earth would happen next. And he said every week I stand up here and offer a benediction, literally a good word, to the church. But this week, well maybe I was the one needing it. And then he led you all in blessing me; he led you all in offering offering me and one another the benediction. And in that moment you entered into this terribly painful place with me, and I have never felt so cared for, so blessed by any congregation. In that instant you pulled over and stopped the car and became a father to me.

In Christ we have a pioneer and a perfecter of our faith- a man who lived as we do and was tested in every way. And in him we see and know a heavenly father who welcomes home every prodigal and who always pulls over and stops the car and enters into our suffering- no matter how many times we have to ask for it. May we all know such fathers here on earth, as we do in heaven. **Amen.**