

A Safe Place for Hurting People

In February of 2011, Teresa and I went to the Children's Pastors' Conference. One of the main session speakers was Britt Merrick, preaching pastor at *Reality Church* in Santa Barbara. During his message, Britt shared the story of his daughter, Daisy Love. Two years earlier Daisy had fallen on the playground at kindergarten. Instead of crying or bouncing back up to play, she told her teachers, "I need to go to the hospital." It was there where her parents received the bad news, "Daisy has stage 3 cancer." It was a rare form of kidney cancer called a Wilms tumor that affects only 500 people in the United States. When she had fallen, Daisy's tumor ruptured spilling cancer cells throughout her abdomen. Surgeons removed a tumor the size of a football that took up most of her abdominal cavity. After surgery, came months of radiation and chemotherapy, but on May 16 of 2010, Daisy Love was declared cancer free. At this point in the story, the audience erupted in applause and praise. They were giving God the glory for healing this little girl.

But as one preacher listening to another preacher, I could tell from the awkward expression on Britt's face that he hadn't finished the story. Once the applause died down and people sat back in their chairs, the very next words he spoke were this, "6 weeks later they found a tumor the size of a large grapefruit." This time the audience sat in stunned silence. No applause. No ovation. No praising God. Just awkward embarrassment. At the time of this message in 2011, this is where things stood. There was no good news. No answered prayers. Only questions and uncertainty. The whole process was starting again. More surgery. More chemo. The thousands of members of Britt's church and believers from all over the world were praying for Daisy.

As I was preparing for this message, I remembered this event, and I went back and watched the video, and I was curious as to what had happened to young Daisy Love, so I found it online. Following this 2nd round, Daisy had several months as a regular kid before the next tumor came. Then more surgery and the loss of her spleen. Months of more treatments, much of it not covered by insurance. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised by the generous donations of Christians from all over. On December 13, 2012 two more tumors were discovered. This time they were so large it impacted blood flow to her major organs. There was nothing more the doctors could do. Daisy Love spent her last days at home and died on Feb. 16, 2013.

That one moment from one sermon stuck in my mind for these last five years because it reveals so much about us as North American Christians. We are all about the victory, the overcoming, the healing, the deliverance, the testimony where everything ends well. Sing the right songs, pray the right prayers, serve in the right ministries and live the right life, and everything will work out wonderfully.

Except that it doesn't. Every single one of us will have times in life where it doesn't end well. Who hasn't lost something? Who doesn't fear something? Who doesn't ache with something? The truth is there are times there is no healing. The tests don't come back free and clear. Doctors aren't left baffled, and the disease runs its course. Sometimes, the marriage isn't saved. No matter how bad you want it to. No matter how much you talk to a counselor, it still ends in divorce. There is no reconciliation, and the only one who come out better off on the other side are the lawyers. Sometimes your child abandons the faith you raised them in and never comes back. Sometimes, there is never an unexpected check in the mail. The sale doesn't go through. The loan isn't approved. The house is lost. The business folds. The IRS comes down hard. Everything is lost.

I think there are many who have given up on the church, not because they don't believe in Jesus, not because bad things happen to good people, but because the church hasn't been honest about this. We haven't told the truth about trials and tribulation. We haven't been upfront about the true role pain and suffering plays in our journey with Jesus. As a result, we leave people who hurt feeling as though they are less than. The sad, the hurting, the depressed, and the ones with the aching hearts feel like 2nd class citizens in the kingdom of God.

We forget that our Savior was a man of sorrows. We forget that in being joined to Christ, we also, as Peter wrote in 1 Pt. 4:13, "*share in the sufferings of Christ.*" Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:5 that we, "*share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ.*" Yes, he goes on to say, "*So also our comfort abounds through Christ.*" But why do we think when someone is going through the suffering part they should be able to skip right through it and go straight to the comfort? If we as a church are going to fulfill our purpose as a church to touch the hurting world around us we're going to have to be a safe place for hurting people.

That's what I want to talk about this morning, how we at Son-Rise Christian Church can be a safe place for hurting people. Back in 2011 about the same time I heard Britt Merrick's message, I also listened to another presentation from the Gospel Coalition. It was by Nancy Guthrie. Her story was

heartbreaking. She lost two children as babies to a rare disorder. Her message was, *“Is Your Church a Safe Place for Sad People?”* That really impacted me. I took notes. I wrote down some thoughts and observations. In planning this series, I thought back to that message, and wanted to use it here. Let me just say here though that the credit for the basic structure of this message goes to Nancy Guthrie. As preachers we can beg, we can borrow, but we can’t steal without giving credit.

What does a church that is a safe place for hurting people look like?

I. It overcomes the awkwardness to engage.

First of all, it overcomes the awkwardness to engage. You know that, “I don’t know what to say to them, so I won’t say anything” syndrome. One of the things I’ve heard from so many passing through very painful periods of life is, “Everyone just disappeared. All of our friends, our church family, even those that we were sure would be there for us, just disappeared.”

They weren’t trying to be mean. They certainly didn’t intend to be unloving. They just felt awkward and uncertain and fearful. They were so afraid of saying the WRONG thing that they said NO THING. Sometimes the worst part about hurting, isn’t so much the pain, but it is being alone with it.

We need to overcome that awkwardness to engage. We need to love the other person enough, and trust God’s Spirit working in us enough to approach the other person. No, we don’t have all the answers. We won’t be able to say all the right things, but our love and the Holy Spirit can still work through the tender expression of being there.

Jesus was always willing to engage the hurting person. He would break from a pressing crowd. He would pause from urgent demands on his time to approach that one person that everyone else avoided. He touched the one person that nobody else would touch. He ate with those no one else would go to dinner with. One thing that is very clear from the Gospels is that hurting people loved Jesus. Why is that? He went to them. He approached them. He would dare be with them in their circle of pain. That’s why they started coming to Him.

Who might start coming here, if we were truly a safe place for hurting people?

I know any of us would be there if they asked. We would drop everything at a moment’s notice if the hurting person let us know how much they needed us, but they won’t. Many times, they can’t. We must reach out to them. We must approach them. The woman at the well would have never talked to Jesus on her own, if he didn’t talk to her first.

It doesn't matter if you don't know the exact right thing to say. One thing I've learned as a pastor is I don't have all the answers. I don't have all the right words. I have been in hospital rooms with families in the midst of loss, and there have been times, I did nothing but cry with them, hug them and hurt with them. They always say later. "It meant so much to us. You were such a support." And I'm thinking, "I didn't do anything." I was just sitting there thinking, "I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do." But I did the most important thing. I went. I was there.

Be willing to approach them, even if they're difficult to approach. Hurting people can be like porcupines. They're lonely, but make it hard for people to draw close. We need to be willing to endure a few stabs. Yes, it's awkward. You will say something stupid. You will be at a loss of words. They may even lash out at you. It's because they're hurting.

It's okay to say, "I don't know what to say..." Don't pretend to have the words to fix this. Don't act like you have all the answers. We don't know the answers. We only know Him who is the Answer. That's all. Nothing more. And simply by engaging you can be Jesus to someone who is hurting. As a safe place for hurting people, we overcome the awkwardness to engage.

II. It Makes Room for Tears and Sadness

A second thing you will see in a church that is a safe place for hurting people is that it makes room for tears and sadness. Hurting people need time to heal. They will be sad. It's okay to be sad. It's godly to be sad sometimes. Do you know that sometimes God is sad. Look at Jeremiah 8 and 9. "*Jesus wept.*" It's the one verse everyone can memorize. And he wept at the funeral of a friend. Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, many of the Psalms are in the Bible for a reason. Give room for tears.

God created us with a whole gamut of emotions, from happy and giddy to mournful and sad, and all these feelings have a place and a purpose in His divine plan. We act in church as if certain emotions, and sentiments, and states of mind, are more holy, more spiritual than others. If we have a particularly joyful praise service, and we say, "Wow, you could really feel the Spirit moving today." Has the Spirit moved any less during a service that presses our sad button and the tears come flowing out? Sometimes grace flows through our tears, and God's presence is felt in shadows. Sometimes, as Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes, "*sorrow is better than laughter and a sad face is good for the heart.*"

We need to quit treating those in the sad end of the emotional spectrum as out of place, or less than, especially less spiritual, less godly, less Christ-like, than those who see every day as more blessed

than the one before. The beatitudes make abundantly clear that sorrow is a part of our spiritual journey.

The beatitudes begin with blessing for those who are impoverished in spirit, and those who mourn. Yes, comfort is promised, but the path to comfort is filled with tears. The problem is we act as if that is only a one-time thing, and it should never happen again. The truth is we grow spiritually like the layers of an onion. We journey down that path in many times and many ways. What we need from our brothers and sisters in Christ is for them to journey with us, not stand there with hands on hips saying, “What? Why aren’t you there yet?”

Faith doesn’t make pain hurt less. It hurts just the same. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul says, “*We do not want you to...grieve as others do who have no hope.*” Notice, he doesn’t say we don’t grieve. Hope doesn’t mean we don’t hurt. It means that hurt isn’t the end of the story. There’re more chapters to come. The final chapter doesn’t come until Jesus comes, so until then, we make room for tears and sadness.

III. It Goes Deeper than Deliverance in Prayer

What does a church that is a safe place for hurting people look like? It goes deeper than deliverance in prayer. This is a tough one. Please hear what I am saying, and not what I am not. We’ve got to stop trying to only pray away suffering. American Christians have a nasty habit of treating prayer as though it is spiritual ibuprofen. Do you think the underground church in China prays the same way we do? Do you suppose the church under the guns of ISIS in Iraq this morning has a prayer list that looks like ours?

I’ve heard a statistic. I don’t know where it comes from, and I can’t prove it, but my own experience tells me it’s probably accurate. 95% of all church prayer lists are health concerns and prayers for healing. Here’s where I’m begging you, don’t hear what I’m not saying. I’m not saying this is a bad thing. What I am saying is that is not enough, and that is not a good thing.

A church that only prays for suffering to be removed and not for suffering to be redeemed is not a safe place for hurting people, because the unwritten rule of our prayers is that those who hurt are incomplete and inadequate. There’s a whole lot of stuff we’re not praying about, and we need to be. Oh we pray about these things in our own private prayer closets, but not with each other, and when we do pray for each other, it is so one dimensional. We have this idea if we just pray enough,

have faith enough, there will be healing, there will be victory, and there will be deliverance. And in so doing we just add to the pain, and the shame, and the loneliness of hurting people.

We need to broaden our prayer vocabulary. God doesn't always intend to make our problems smaller. Sometimes He intends to use our problems to make us bigger. Here are some ideas of how we can also pray. We can pray for God's glory to be put on display. We can pray that our pain makes us more fruitful. We can pray that this process makes us more Christ-like, that we would grow in our comfort for others, and that we would learn to depend on Him more fully. We can pray that the life and love of Jesus would be more evident in our lives, that we would experience the sufficiency of Christ, and that we would grow in holiness.

Don't get me wrong, it's okay to pray for healing. It's okay to tell him what we want, but like Jesus we must be willing to join him in saying, "Not my will, but yours be done." In prayer, we can help others pursue that will. We must go deeper than deliverance in our prayer.

IV. It Helps Facilitate Turning Misery into Ministry

The fourth thing we find in a church that is a safe place for hurting people is it helps turn misery into ministry. Listen to 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

It is in our hurt, our loss, our failure, our sadness that we move from the shallow end to the deep end of the theological pool. It is in our pain that we join with Jacob in wrestling with the angel of the Lord. We come away wounded, and yet blessed. It is here that it is no longer words from a pulpit, or a tune sung in worship. It becomes real. Tangible. Suddenly, a sermon rips our heart open and pours God's truth in. Worship inspires hope beyond the hurt. A simple prayer can move mountains in our life and suddenly we find that we can reach out and touch a hurting world.

We can touch a hurting world, because we've hurt too. We can cry with others, because some of those tears are our own. We know their loss. We know their ache. We know there is meaning and

purpose through all of it, but we also know how hard it is to get there. Through serving comes healing. I've been amazed in talking to Sharon Gann and Vicki Umfleet and those in our Grief Share ministry. The reason they are so passionate about that ministry and are so able to help others going through grief and loss is because they've grieved so deeply themselves.

The more honest, and open and vulnerable we are with our own hurt, the more we will find His comfort, and the more we will be able to touch a hurting world. That is how we become a safe place for hurting people. I know how hard it can be to be open about our pain. We know our hearts might be stepped on. We know someone might pass judgment on us. Some of us have been stepped on. Some of us have been judged, and so we decided that next time I am keeping my hurt to myself. But Jesus is calling us. Jesus has shown us the way. Let not one of us step forward alone. Let us make the journey together. Are you willing to become what the church ought to be?

I want to share with you a piece written by Ann Vonkamp, she's written several books as the result of her own battles with depression. I would recommend them to anyone struggling with sadness. At one point she had even scheduled her suicide and wrote her suicide note. She wrote a powerful article after the suicide of Robin Williams last year. At the end of her article, she talked about who we can be as the people of God. This should be our commitment, our mission, our promise.

“We won't give you some cliché – but something to cling to — and that will mean our hands.

We won't give you some platitudes — but some place for your pain — and that will mean our time.

We won't give you some excuses — but we'll be some example — and that will mean bending down and washing your wounds. Wounds that we don't understand, wounds that keep festering, that don't heal, that downright stink — wounds that can never make us turn away.

Because we are the Body of the Wounded Healer and we are the people who believe the impossible — that wounds can be openings to the beauty in us.”

We're the people who say: “there's no shame saying that your heart and head are broken because there's a Doctor in the house. . .

Always safe for the suffering here.