

“My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

*A meditation offered by The Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, LCSW,
Associate Rector, Community Ministry,
at The Three Hours service, April 6, 2012.
Good Friday.
Based on Mark 15: 33-37.*

The Brain on Love is the title of an article by Diane Akerman that appeared two weeks ago in the *New York Times*. Akerman describes the ways which interpersonal neurobiologists are using advances in brain imaging to chart the influence of loving relationships in our lives. Brain imaging studies have shown how the brain is constantly rewiring itself based on its experience of daily life and that "loving relationships alter the brain most significantly." She then observes that, although loving relationships are the best schools for learning about love, "the tuition is high and the homework can be painful."

Akerman quotes imaging studies done by Naomi Eisenberger, a neurobiologist at UCLA, which show that "the same areas of the brain that register physical pain are active when someone feels socially rejected. That's why being spurned by a loved one hurts all over the body, but in no place you can point to." Which also explains why "people around the world use the same images of physical pain to describe a broken heart, which they perceive as crushing and crippling. It's not just a metaphor for an emotional punch. Social pain can trigger the same sort of distress as a stomach ache or a broken bone."

In becoming human, God in Jesus fully embraces the human condition. Capable of loving and being loved, Jesus also experiences the capacity to be hurt and to cause hurt. I am not speaking of hurting caused by the slights and oversights of daily life but rather the deep, crushing, and crippling pain experienced only in profoundly loving relationships. These profoundly loving relationships include both the accidental and biological relationships of families formed by birth or adoption and the intentional and committed relationships formed in marriage and community.

The pain experienced in the context of these profoundly loving relationships is almost never intentional. That is not to say that it may not arise in response to some action on the part of the beloved; rather it is to say that most of us have no idea of the pain we cause others. Most of the time the deepest pain is inevitable. When we are born we are

the cause of great pain. When we die we cause pain. Neither is intentional; both are inevitable.

Jesus knew about pain and yet he lived with a love for the coming realm of God, and he taught others to live with the same passion in communities of love. He knew that living with passion and living with love would be painful and yet he recommended it, for he knew that it was truly the only way to live. His passion for people had brought him to this point and now their betrayal and abandonment intensified his pain as he experienced separation from God. He is forsaken.

When loved ones are not present and when love is not experienced at times of great pain, we feel betrayed, abandoned, and as if we were left to hang on a cross.

And yet the presence of a loved one can change everything.

The interpersonal neurologists have studied the responses to an electrical shock when alone and while holding a loving partner's hand. The test measured anxiety before and pain levels during the shocks. You guessed it: There was a significantly lower anxiety response. They compared these findings with others in troubled relationships and found no protective response. The presence of loved ones "can subdue blood pressure, ease your response to stress, improve your health and soften physical pain." Is it any wonder that Jesus was passionate about forming a loving human community? Is it any wonder he felt so bereft when they abandoned him?

The words of Psalm 22, which the choir has just sung—that the words of that Psalm come to the lips of Jesus—are some of the most stark expressions of the feelings at times of complete abandonment. And yet the psalmist cries for God to "be not far." Interestingly, the Psalm continues and the psalmist begins to recognize the presence of God and lists the mighty acts that can be accomplished because of the presence of God. The early Church placed great emphasis on assisting the poor with appropriate burial of the dead and became expert in forming community with the bereaved and helping them through the pain, assuring them of God's love when they could only feel the pain.

As Christian people today we need to be sure that no one is abandoned in times like these. Times of mortal illness, death, psychic dismemberment, and pain are all times when people feel forsaken. When a friend or loved one or a member of the community is going through loss or is in grief, we need to be present. Most probably we will not be able to fix the problem, but by our presence we can join the sufferers and help them through the pain. The natural human reaction is to shy away from people in distress because we don't know what to do or to say. But what people need is not for us to do or say anything. Often at times like this, there is nothing to do and nothing to say. Times

like this, when we feel utterly abandoned, what we need is to feel presence. At times like this, presence is all that really matters.