

<p>When Death Seduces the Living: What Every Pastor Must Know About Suicide Presented by: Beverly K. Yahnke, Ph.D.</p>

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It is both a pleasure and surprise to be with you this afternoon. A pleasure, for this conference addresses matters of eternal importance, yet responds to matters rooted deeply in the turmoil of our time. Candidly, I couldn't have been more surprised to receive an invitation from the planning committee.

I warned the conference coordinators that I am not a theologian. I'm surely not an exegete. I'm not a biologist; an ethicist nor a bio-ethicist. I assured them that they didn't want a clinical psychologist. Then they mentioned that the topic was "suffering," and I was easily persuaded, for my professional vocation is steeped in the suffering of many Godly people. As a Christian psychologist I have been privileged to be a companion to many who have journeyed across landscapes of pain and suffering.

My clients have schooled me in understanding the gift of suffering for the Christian soul and they have also helped me to understand how it is that suffering can create a paralysis of faith that renders fragile souls incapable of taking possession of the gifts of Christ. I've seen suffering of mind and body that may leave a soul cocooned in a chamber of despair that seems nearly impenetrable. Candidly, I have encountered a raging clinical and spiritual despair for which graduate school never prepared me.

My world is peopled with minds and souls that may be housed in healthy bodies, but which have been taken captive by pain of a different sort. Usually, those in despair have had some safety net of life pulled out from beneath them and they may have spent weeks, months or years suffocated by a toxic depression or disabling anxiety. This kind of pain cripples hearts and souls, calcifies the spirit and may be so disabling that one desires death at one's own hand. We don't speak a great deal about suicide in the church, almost as though our very conversation will suggest to the vulnerable or frail in spirit, to act on their darkest and most hidden impulses.

Yet, those of us who would provide meaningful care for our brothers and sisters in Christ would be wise to examine the startling underbelly of this emotional beast. Despair is not simple despondency, discouragement, or defeat. Despair

dwarfs the pain of all other emotional dysfunction. I have come to believe that tempting the Christian to despair is among Satan's most satisfying and dastardly achievements. For when we dissect the reality of despair we look clearly at what it means to live without hope – and life without hope is most clearly defined as life without God. As you might well guess, if one has no hope, if one is separated from God, one loses all reason to live. It comes as no surprise, then, that despair finds its most grim expression in acts of suicide. Despair dispatches the soul on a pathway away from holiness, hope and the gifts of Christ.

So what it is that we know about suffering and how is one to respond to suffering so as to provide hope and preserve life? We'll examine two clear and competing perspectives: natural man's perspective, deeply embedded in cultural myths and then there is the perspective of our most holy God - that is, the Truth. Finally we'll profile a variety of responses to suffering, with a specific focus on the challenge of breaking through despair in order to bring Christ's gifts to those in pain.

Our culture has determined that suffering is emblematic of failure. The cultural myth would have us believe that one suffers usually as a result of a failure to purchase the best services, or a failure to seek the most appropriate care, or a failure to be sufficiently resilient in the face of otherwise surmountable obstacles. Suffering is regarded by our culture as a loss of personal effectiveness and control; or, suffering is regarded as an unnecessary surrender to circumstances that need not beat us. We are a "can do", culture; a "can win" culture. We do not abide failure whether it's on the football field or in the nursing home.

Not only do we regard suffering as a failure, but we proclaim that suffering is meaningless, and pointless. No sensible post-modern person will tolerate suffering – one's own, or anyone else's for that matter. The culture's mantra sounds remarkably compassionate and sensible as well: "suffering must be stopped." And even some Christians will nod vertically "Absolutely right," we say!

The culturally endorsed truth is that no one should suffer. Suffering is wrong. Suffering is unconscionable. A person, family, community or government that allows for suffering to continue unabated is morally reprehensible. Implied in that worldview is the certain prescription that individuals and civilized communities must prevent, diminish or extinguish suffering.

And then along comes someone like Pope John Paul II. In the final years of his life, he catechized the world about the nature of suffering. He became an exemplar of what it means to suffer with dignity and in Christian hope. His life and the manner of his death contradicted everything about the culture's teaching. In his last days, the Pope offered his life witness as a steadfast testimony to "choice" of a sanctified sort. His choice was to honor God's gift of life and to use

his life in service. He worked, prayed, conferred, blessed, taught, wrote and spoke of God's love, mercy and grace throughout his suffering. Let the record show, he seems to have told us, that to be old and to be ill is not incompatible with service and purposeful living. His bold lesson to us all was that the elderly, the frail and the ill are not disposable. Each of his last days underscored that there is love and grace and even serenity in the face of suffering as one waits upon the Lord. Services in honor of his life and ministry pointed to his transcendence in life and his peacefulness and dignity approaching death. For a moment, many people actually got it: life is precious.

Yet, without missing a beat, the culture returned quickly to preaching its sunny anthem that we should be able to exercise choice and personal control in all matters -- including how it is that we respond to our own suffering. We continued to endorse another specter of choice and control: we will assist individuals to end their suffering. In an astonishing perversion of compassion we will kill them.

Our culture has offered a bold array of toxic responses to suffering. Assisted suicide has become a culturally sanctioned expression of mercy. We have actually made sense of the horrific oxymoron: mercy killing. Motivated from our need to rescue people from an abyss of meaningless suffering, some have begun to respond to human suffering in the same way we would respond to the suffering of any simple creature.

In 1999 a court in Michigan sentenced euthanasia's most storied physician, Dr. Jack Kevorkian, to a sentence from 10 to 25 years in prison, thereby ending his career as a serial killer. He took the lives of 130 people – proudly and publicly. Subsequently, 15 states reinforced their laws prohibiting the practice of mercy killing. We know that God has written His law onto man's heart; that is the only explanation I can offer for the defeat of bills that would have allowed euthanasia in Washington State, California, Michigan and Maine.

Yet, we have invited our culture's designated healers, our physicians, to participate in a deadly conspiracy against life. In Oregon, doctors may write but may not administer lethal prescriptions: a distinction without a difference. The patient dies every time. We had more wisdom about medical responsibility in the 5th century BC when the Hippocratic Oath was penned, stating, "I will give no deadly medicine to any one if asked, nor suggest any such counsel."

So what is the state of the art in the government's beneficent plan to end suffering? Although Oregon passed an assisted suicide initiative in 1994, they did so with a slim 51% majority. In Oregon, in the last seven years, 208 people took legal, lethal overdose prescriptions. The situation can only worsen, though, as the "right to die" in Oregon slowly becomes understood by the frail, ill and elderly as a "duty to die" in order to preserve family financial resources or to

unburden caregivers. How long will it be before death certificates bear testimony to the cause of death: death by nuisance.

The right to death movement, or the death with dignity movement is alive, well and a clear temptation to those who suffer. A Time poll done in April of this year reported that 70% of those polled believed that “incurably ill patients have the right to ask for and get life-ending medication. More than two-thirds said they would want their doctor to help them die if they were expected to live less than six months.” Our culture teaches that suffering is unnecessary, and that ending suffering is noble. In the Terry Schiavo debacle, the conscience of the Christian community was overruled by a court-mandated death, in honor of choice and control, of course.

Let’s not miss the mind melting fact that our culture believes so deeply in the crusade to end suffering that it has actually begun to prevent a baby’s suffering by ending a child’s life before birth. If an unborn child has clinically detected abnormalities after the first trimester, 27 states now have laws allowing parents the right to bring *unlawful birth suits* against doctors who deliver children against their parents’ will. The culture shrugs: when a small life of small value has been lost – who will notice? Who will care?

When we stop the PC spin long enough to think clearly, the hypocrisy is really somewhat alarming. Level minded and right thinking individuals wring their hands and shake their heads sadly in response to news of a suicide. The traditional outpouring of lamentations includes, "what a waste, what a shame, if only we had known." We ask, "How could this tragedy have been prevented? Interestingly, there is also a great deal of scurry and worry that the example of anyone’s suicide might give other people unhealthy ideas.

Yet, these same level minded, pillars of society may look at the news of a doctor assisted suicide or abortion and nod sympathetically, intoning, "how courageous," "it's so important that she could honor her own wisdom." Or, we hear the heartfelt consensus expressed, “what a relief that he could choose to end things when he knew it was right for him."

The responses are radically different, yet the precious commodity lost in both circumstances is life. Apparently life has value only under certain circumstances. We value the life of teens, the life of middle age people, the life of seemingly normal individuals who have the capacity to be productive without having necessities that burden the rest of us.

So amid all of the spirited conversation regarding our cultural convention of ending suffering by exercising choice and control, we can’t be surprised to learn that suicide is the third leading cause of death among those aged 15-24, behind only car accidents and homicides. It is the eighth leading cause of death for all

men. The culture has so saturated us with its message of the “right to die” that in the minds of many suffering people, death at one’s own hands has become a viable alternative to suffering, however we may define it. Hence, at a conference concerned with the holiness of life, we are wise to examine how it is that despair can cripple psyche and soul to the point of death.

Psychologists look at this data and acknowledge that many individuals have no discernible tools or resources to deal with any kind of pain and many are left to contend with suffering in a solitary fashion. Suffering overwhelms them. Some welcome death as an escape and relief. Psychologists preach early detection and treatment.

The Center for Disease Control regards suicide as a public health epidemic, reporting that 50-80% of teens think about suicide when they are in some sort of pain. An unspeakable 8-10% of teens attempt suicide. It is estimated that suicide is currently the 11th leading cause of death for Americans. The CDC predicts that by the year 2010, suicide will be the number one cause of morbidity in the world.

We dare not look only at our youth. Suicide rates in the elderly are frightening, with white males over age 85 the most likely to take their own lives. Suicide rates increase with age and are highest among white males aged 65 and older. Worse, 66% of the elderly who suicided, saw their doctor within the month, 40% within the week and a stunning 20% of the elderly visited with their doctor the day before taking their lives. How I wish I knew when they last saw their pastors.

I’m pretty convinced it is Satan who whispers into the ears of the suffering: “suicide is the right choice, suicide will free you from all of this; suicide will make everything stop; suicide provides exactly what you require – escape, freedom and control.” Yet Satan appears to have all sorts of earthly helpers, some, trained by the American Association of Suicidology recommend “one is helpful to a suicidal person when one doesn’t lecture on the value of life and one remains non-judgmental, certainly never debating whether suicide is “right” or “wrong.”

False guidelines and lies like this are everywhere on the web for those who want a crash course on “helping” those who suffer. There is no disputing the fact that just as Satan tempted our Lord, Satan will continue to be much at work in tempting God’s baptized children to succumb to evil.

Luther seems to have understood Satan’s role in twisting hearts and minds. In 1532 he wrote these words about those who suicided, “I don’t share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber. However,” Luther notes, “this ought

not be taught to the common people, lest Satan be given an opportunity to cause slaughter.” Luther concludes, “Suicides . . . are examples by which our Lord God wishes to show that the devil is powerful and also that we should be diligent in prayers.”

Suicide also teaches, in wrenching fashion, to those left behind to mourn, that life, pre-empted by death is tragic. Suicide teaches us to honor life, support life, encourage life and rescue life that is imperiled in body, mind or spirit. Let’s be sure we’re all on the same page of the hymnal shall we? God the Father gave His image to the first man, Adam, with His life-giving Breath. Man was holy, righteous and in perfect communion with His creator. The crunch of the apple in the garden of Eden would have worked death for all of Adam’s children, had it not been for the blood bought gifts of Christ, through whom God’s children were restored to communion with the Father and given Christ’s own perfect righteousness and holiness. Therefore, life in God’s image shall always be regarded as precious, sacred and eternal. If we must get ourselves into a lather about choice, the only choice that matters eternally is the choice of how to respond to the life giving Gospel in the person of Jesus Christ especially in the presence of suffering.

Those of us who work with hurting people had well better be able to identify what it is that prevents God’s children from taking possession of His gifts and His promises in the midst of real suffering. We’ve noted the cultural axiom teaching that functional and effective people ought to seize control of their lives (and their deaths, for that matter.) Control is an amazing drug of choice. When one chooses to take control of one’s own life, the appearance of idols in the life of postmodern man is a predictable and dangerous consequence.

I’ve come to believe that one of the most insidious threats to the Christian and to his faith is the presence of idols in his life. The unholy altar at which Christians stumble rests in their hearts and minds. In the privacy of their hearts they unblinkingly and unthinkingly worship the unholy Trinity of “me, myself and I.” Idols are our quiet, whispering habits of self-reliance that seduce us away from our dependency on our Heavenly Father. Briefly defined, I believe that postmodern idols are our solutions for our own problems. Sadly, it is often our solutions that sustain our spiritual distress.

The psychological community, although unacquainted with idolatry, is very knowledgeable about research outcomes regarding self-reliance. Research has taught us that the greater our personal effort, the greater our hope will be. Yet whenever we attempt to attain unreachable goals we will interpret the failure as a lack of sufficient effort or commitment and we’ll try harder and harder. That is, of course, until we continue to fail again and again and we lose our willingness to try any longer and then we become depressed. Research tells us that when we’re

overly optimistic in predicting successful outcomes for our own efforts and we fail, we feel guilt and self-hatred.

If we translated the research into theology-friendly language we would have to conclude that when we work hard to control our own lives, to combat temptation, and to remain hopeful in trying times, we discover that we do not have the personal resources to accomplish what is needed. We are left with guilt and self-hatred: despair. Idolatry breeds despair.

This prompts me to ask, "When is the last time you read Luther's Large Catechism?" Luther teaches us in his explanation to the first commandment that we rely on idols whenever we look to anything or to anyone other than God as a refuge. God would tell us, "whenever you lack any good thing, come to me for it. Whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, or discontent reach out to me, and I alone will help you in every trouble." God asks that we give Him our whole confidence and place ourselves completely into His hands – first. Idols are anything or anyone we turn to before we turn to God. Many of us turn to God only when we've depleted all of our own resources and have failed again and again.

Idolatry is born of a pernicious pride that undermines the soul's need for God. Such pride regards prayerful petitions as an emergency response strategy, useful only when all other, more immediate and meaningful tools have been exhausted. Perhaps a brief illustration from one of my clients will help. It paints in dark brush strokes, the picture of how early such idolatries can begin. One little girl whom I see clinically is six years old. She is a bright, beautiful child enrolled in a Lutheran elementary school. Her mom brought her in for care after the little girl began saying, "I just want to go and live with Jesus now. I don't want to live on earth anymore." She is six years old! The little girl had already experienced many losses in her brief life. When I asked if she prayed when she was feeling sad she told me, "My daddy says that prayer is just a head game." I asked her, "So what does your daddy say you should do when things get really hard?" She told me, "My daddy just tells me 'suck it up'." She explained, "I just have to deal with it because no one can make it better."

She sounds like some of the people I see who are in their fourth, fifth or sixth decade of life and they sorrowfully report, "I know the verse that we are to cast our cares upon Him for He cares for us." Then they go on to explain to me that no one has ever taught them how to do that. So they keep trying to be all, do all, and fix all, all by themselves, until they are all done in.

For those of you who are called servants, or who have a vocation of helping and hearing others in pain, we need to listen carefully. Listen for what I have begun

to call the moment of truth – it is the moment that most clients believe is the worst part of their depression.

Listen with great hopefulness as individuals begin to say, “I can’t deal with this;” or when they cry out, “I can’t stand it,” “I can’t handle it any more.” Although people speak these words in acknowledgement of a deeply personal, shameful defeat, such words are really a cause for celebration: they have finally spoken the truth. The comforting truth is that it is only when we are fortified with the gifts of our good and loving Lord that we have hope. Only, by the grace of God, can we even begin to imagine that our life could change and that a healing transcendence is possible.

Expressions of helplessness are often breakthrough moments when we can reassure individuals that they are right to disavow their idolatry. In their statement of despair they are relinquishing the powerful idolatry of self-reliance. For our God did not send His Son to save the self-reliant. It is, indeed, only the sin sick who require a physician, not the healthy. The alternative to taking possession of God’s rich promises is a life of captivity to one’s own puny resources -- a life lived in a solitary cell with bars of despair and hopelessness. We must listen for idolatry, and help those who struggle to see it and confess it.

Clinical depression is another of the realities that can separate a soul from God. This emotionally devastating disorder arrives in the lives of its victims, packing the wallop of an emotional and spiritual tsunami. The storm of depression can be so devastating that it relentlessly tears away from the Christian the very comforts of his faith and communion with his God.

Some of you gathered here this afternoon have known personal suffering, the suffering of a loved one or the despair of a heart, soul and mind entrusted to your care. For those of you who have not known depression, I commend for your reading a book entitled, “Speaking of Sadness.” The text is one of the better sociological studies I’ve seen describe this illness.

The book, authored by David Karp, is a penetrating analysis into the intricacies of mental illness. He defines precisely how it is that depression works devastation and cannibalizes hope. He tells us that depression is “an illness of isolation, wherein depressed persons greatly desire connection at the same time” they are emotionally incapable of connecting. The depressed person feels like something of an innocent bystander, sitting in the bleacher seating of his own life and watching his life unravel before him as human connection becomes impossible.

Nearly all of my clients who suffer with depression lament the fact that no one understands what depression really is like. It is an invisible thief of joy and casts a suffocating pall over every dimension of one’s life. Depression keeps others

out and seals one in a cave of one's own misery where even the simplest tasks and rituals of daily life seem to be too hard to accomplish. Daily life is filled with self-loathing, one's thoughts are consumed by preoccupation with real and imagined guilt, and feelings of failure trump reality.

After weeks, or months or years of physicians' visits, anti-depressant regimens, and weekly visits with well-intentioned psychologists one can become unspeakably weary and depleted. After unbearable intervals of time are spent waiting for any evidence that there is any hope of any change, even well pedigreed Christians can find themselves saying, "I hate myself. I hate my life. I wish that I were dead."

Even God's baptized children can find themselves surfing the web for the Hemlock Society, or sitting at the edge of their bed holding a loaded pistol or a hand full of pills. With all due respect, in moments like that one isn't thinking about the image of God. One is not regarding life as precious. One simply wants release, transcendence and any kind of escape from the pain. Some have suggested that death at one's own hand be called penacide, "killing suffering," instead of suicide, "killing oneself." One man told me he was thinking about the promises in Romans 8 when he took an overdose, confident, he said, "that nothing would separate him from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus."

How could a Christian think such a thing? How could a Christian do such a thing? This description from Karp's book helps us to understand the incomprehensible pain of depression. Karp writes, "Depression is an insidious vacuum that crawls into your brain and pushes your mind out of the way. It is the complete absence of rational thought. It is a horrifying, terrifying fog wafting throughout whatever is left of your mind." Karp explains, "when you are in it there is no more empathy, no intellect, no imagination, no compassion, no humanity, no hope. Depression steals away whoever you were, prevents you from seeing who you might someday be and replaces your life with a black hole. Like a sweater eaten by moths, nothing is left of the original, only fragments that hinted at greater things. Nothing and no one matters any more because nothing and no one can reach the person trapped in the void".

How is it that one honors life even in the midst of oppressive depression? How is it that one takes possession of the gifts of Christ at a time when the devil, worldly wisdom and one's own mental illness cohere to advocate death as an enlightened solution? How is it that one brings the very cross of Jesus Christ into the midst of suffering and desolation? The answers to these questions rest at the heart of Christian soul care. For at the heart of all Christian love and all pastoral care for the soul is the love and care of the risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Most assuredly we needed to reach a spiritual destination. Let's be clear though, shall we? Spirituality is all the rage in these postmodern days. The Times of London wrote exactly one year ago, "Christianity will be eclipsed by spirituality within the next 20 to 30 years. This movement will prove more significant than the Reformation." US News and World Report's Dec. 2004 issue on "50 Ways to Fix Your Life" identified as #2 on the list – meditation. Transcendence is the ultimate out of body experience. Transcendence is available in many flavors these days, including healing crystals, aroma therapy and transcendental meditation, or you can do yoga, tai chi, qui gong or inhale and exhale yourself into contemplative peace. Most psychologists would agree that spirituality provides any who suffer with transcendence, a new identity, a wiser perspective from which to understand one's own helplessness as well as some sort of extrasensory, depth truth.

This kind of generic spirituality provides transcendence for some. However, those of us gathered together for this conference have been given to understand that life, and suffering as a thread of that life, must be understood from a Christocentric view, not an anthropocentric or egocentric view. Christocentric suffering has nothing to do with redefining God as our manservant, made over into our likeness and devoted to meeting our needs in the manner we have ordained.

Suffering often brings nominal Christians face-to-face with the extreme makeover god we've created in our own image. The twisted, cultural view of Jesus is all that we know. Nothing could better underscore the need for some sound teaching, and some sound preaching. Some Christians have become acquainted with Jesus the buddy or Jesus the significant other, who has promised to assist us in our unquenchable quest to be healthy, wealthy and wise. If that is all we know of Jesus, then most certainly our despair during times of genuine suffering will deepen. Caregivers need to ask care seekers some serious questions about the nature and the identity of the God to whom they've turned.

For when our suffering doesn't end, our diagnosis doesn't change and our prospects for well being dim, we feel that our personally-custom-designed-Jesus has failed us. He's not kept up His end of the bargain – at least as we have defined it. It's no secret that some Christians have lost touch with the Biblical Jesus. Some have heard a truncated or warped account of the real Christ, devoid of the facts regarding who He is and what it is that He has done. Some have hardly any acquaintance with Biblical theology and simply no longer have a clue about Jesus, the sinless Son of God, the cross-bearer, the Redeemer who suffered, died and rose from the dead on Easter morning.

Perhaps we're unacquainted with Him because some pulpits don't find it uplifting to preach about the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. Perhaps we don't

imagine that we're going to grow our church membership by preaching some of the more sobering truths regarding what our Lord has taught us.

I'm confident, for example, that Luther's Sermon on Cross and Suffering preached in 1530, would shock and amaze many postmodern Christians. Luther writes, "every Christian must be aware that suffering will not fail to come. That in fact God has appointed that we should suffer; and it cannot be otherwise." Dr. Luther preaches, "our suffering conforms us to our Lord that we may become like Him here in suffering and there, in that life to come, in honor and glory." The goal is that sanctification in suffering is what Luther calls "the Christian art which we must all learn, the art of looking to the Word and looking away from all the trouble and suffering that lies upon us." "Christ has taught us "in me you should have peace, but in the world, tribulation."

Perhaps in the minds of some, the last thing a vibrant, growing church wants to preach during a membership campaign is that we are to take up our cross and follow Him – or we are not worthy of Him. It's just not a perky, pithy message. And we are a fun-loving kind of species, after all.

Clearly, the consequences of selective teaching and preaching are tragic. When Christians are not catechized in the faith it is nearly impossible for them to find comfort in spiritual resources when they are suffering. Some Christians become angry with God, retreating from His presence and feeling justified in their wrath. One woman diagnosed with severe, recurrent depression, her voice colored with disdain, explained to me, "Sure I'm a Christian; just another helpless believer in the hands of a capricious God who has failed me again and again." Another Christian client choking back tears told me, "My church teaches that if you're suffering it is because your faith is inadequate. So I've prayed and read my Bible and prayed some more and my faith is still not acceptable to God."

Many who suffer are captive to their own myths regarding what it is that God has done, what God has promised and what it is that God works in the suffering of His children. It is God's own truth that sets us free from our captivity to the prevailing cultural explanations and frees us from our solutions to our own suffering. For our Lord and Savior has forever made holy all human suffering, revealing the glory of God. Jesus, the only Son of the Father, incarnate by Mary in mortal human flesh, chose to honor His Father's will and to drink the cup of death given for the salvation of all human kind. In Christ's holy suffering, crucifixion and death, Jesus as suffering servant has imbued all pain, helplessness, and even death with His own holiness.

Now for some difficult news, particularly for those of you who preach God's strong Word and who administer His Sacraments faithfully. We would like to believe that when Christians are properly instructed, they will be comforted by

songs, hymns, prayers, and the means of grace. We expect that they will seek out every opportunity for corporate worship and perhaps even request individual spiritual care. We know, after all, that God has promised to be present in His Word and Sacrament, and we realize that God has instituted the holy office of the ministry to provide the gifts of Christ for His baptized faithful. We have God's promise that His Word is Spirit and it is Life.

Yet knowing that, some life-long Christians may hear the Word preached and find no comfort. They may receive the Sacrament in faith, indeed believing that their sins are forgiven for Jesus sake, only to find that their feeling of despair is unchanged. In fact, they may even find that hearing the Word seems to add to their pain and mental anguish. How can this be? When despairing minds and souls look at the church's explanation of suffering, their mental soup is so thick and their thinking is so egocentric that one can actually recoil from the Truth of God's Word.

The prodigal spirit must be pointed with patience and quiet encouragement to the Biblical facts around which he can wrap his mind and soul. The suffering soul does not delight in abstract theological flourishes. In the despair of depression the siren call of death penetrates the fog with clarity, urgency and simplicity.

As we endeavor, by the grace of God to rescue the soul seduced by death, our call should be clear, urgent and simple, as well. There is no certain path through the fog of depression to the soul – for that mystery lies within the province and power of God's Holy Spirit, yet after a couple of decades of clinical practice, I've come to believe that for pastors and Christians friends, there is a top ten list of useful responses when it comes to reaching out to those who are in despair.

First, acknowledge that if a soul is shrouded in depression, professional clinical care is essential. One pastor assured a woman that "Word and Sacrament are all that you will require for your healing." He told her that to seek psychological care was to turn to a rival religion. She came to see me, behind her pastor's back, because she had been tying garbage bags around her head at night, hoping she would be brave enough to leave them on and die before the morning. She told me, "I can't even think straight anymore." Psychological care and medical care may help to diminish suicidal ideation, delusional thinking and anxious ruminations about death *so that* God's holy Word can be heard. Be so bold as to ask, "Are you safe?" "Are you thinking about hurting yourself?" "Have you found yourself almost wishing you were dead?" If the answer is "yes," immediate medical care is required. You will not prompt anyone to suicide by asking these questions, but you may, indeed prevent a needless loss of life by making some explicit inquiries about their thoughts and intentions. Yet once medical care has been sought and perhaps even medication has been

administered, don't presume that our needs are met and that all is well. We will continue to need you to provide meaningful spiritual care.

Secondly we realize that God's ways are higher than our ways. And we realize that God has not chosen to reveal all things to us. Yet our lives are full of questions. Why me? Why now? Why this? "Why is God punishing me? How could God let this happen if He loves me? Why won't God answer my prayers?" For centuries these questions have echoed across the darkest moments known on earth and have been asked by an awful lot of God's children

Each Christian must be prepared to have Godly answers available for the toughest questions of this or any time. Thomas Oden, in his book Pastoral Theology, offers an engaging discussion of the twelve most helpful pastoral consolations that are rooted in Biblical truth. The consolations are compassionate yet candid responses to those who wonder despairingly about the misfortune in their lives.

I commend Oden's text for your careful study. The consolations are centuries old, and eternally wise. Among the consolations, Oden numbers observations such as these: God does not directly will suffering; God gives us free will from which evil may emerge; God's power may draw good out of any evil; and evil surely does not limit God's power. Such truths create the possibility for rich discussion, always pointing to God's goodness, love and fidelity in the face of evil. This would be wonderful grist for milling on another day. Oden is clear when he writes, "we cannot say nothing." I would be so bold as to say, we cannot stammer and fumble, embarrassed at our inability to speak God's Word of consolation in response to another's cry. We must be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in us.

I should mention that we also benefit from examining the lives of others who have suffered in a Godly fashion. Take Job, for example. We find a peculiar kind of comfort that Job didn't seem to be immune from suffering. By Biblical account we know that Job, "was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil." In fact, on one particularly noteworthy day in history, God said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." Now there's a great character reference. Nevertheless God, to our complete amazement, gives Satan carte blanche regarding Job, "everything that he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

We notice that God did not deign to offer Job an answer to his question, "Why, Lord?" Instead, God had a few questions for Job. Pointing to His astonishing omnipotence, He spends several chapters inquiring of Job, (I'll offer my translation, and you're right to imagine I haven't taken Hebrew.) God asks

“where were you when I was dazzling the universe with each scintillating feature of my creation?” Job doesn’t have much to say. God continues, “I am, have been, and will always be God – for that you may be thankful.” Questions do not serve you nor glorify me. My job is to be God, your job is to be faithful. Be that as it may, Job gets the picture by Chapter 42 and responds, “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.” In Job’s proclamation, we see that his life, mind and faith were, indeed, refined by fire.

If God allowed Job to suffer to fulfill a wonderful purpose, why should we expect that we will be free from suffering? Occasionally we need to have the truths of Job’s suffering spelled out for us in large font and capital letters: If God could sustain Job’s faith when assailed by Satan, himself - He can surely sustain me. Most compelling of all, if God did not exempt His own Son from suffering, those who would expect to be disciplines of a suffering servant cannot be surprised when our lives are touched by pain.

Third, try not to be shocked that despairing souls don’t immediately find comfort in the Service of the Word or in the Divine Service. Although God gathers His faithful around the Table on Sundays, many of the despairing feel neither inclined nor worthy enough to attend. For many in great emotional pain, simply hearing the liturgy or hymns of the church can cause weeping. They hear the promises of love, comfort and hope intoned all around them at a time they feel spiritually destitute. We’ll need your help to understand that the facts of our faith do not change according to our feelings. Many of the flock suffering with particular burdens will require individual spiritual care, a seelsorger’s care for the soul, to prepare them to return to worship, to hear the Word and take possession of the gifts of Christ in corporate worship.

Fourth, I must underscore my observation that among the finest gifts a pastor, or any other Christian can give to a burdened soul is the gift of listening; listening to one soul at a time; listening selflessly and listening sacrificially. For if one is willing to listen first, one will hear the sin sick soul pour out a litany of sins.

Those of you familiar with Roman moral theology recognize that the seventh deadly sin is acedia, or melancholy. Bonhoeffer wrote, “It drives him to complete isolation so that he tells himself life is senseless Darkness descends between God and the person so that the person loses God. The person who is tested by melancholy is a bouncing ball in the hands of the devil, given to thoughts of suicide.” Bonhoeffer notes, “There is a particular danger that melancholy will not be considered a sin. It’s important to see through this as a special stratagem of the devil, who would like to grasp the tempted person in the midst of his lack of trust in God.”

If you will listen, the lacerated and despairing heart will tell you that we doubt God's goodness and power; we doubt God's justice. We doubt God's promises. We doubt God's love. We live in fear and self-loathing. We live as captives to idolatry, misbelief, unbelief and despair and are routinely propelled towards other great shame and vice. Great hope and healing are given if you don't regard the individual's story as a sad autobiography, but instead, hear it for what it really is: a confession. Seize the opportunity to respond to a genuine and repentant heart by acknowledging that they are right to speak of such things for they are speaking the truth about sin. Speak a Word of absolution; give Christ's own life and hope and holiness to the suffering soul before you. In a world seeking transcendence and transformation, the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is unparalleled. In the Word of absolution we are given new life, our baptismal identity is renewed and we are mindful anew of what it is that God has done for us in our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Fifth, It is pure gift if you can acknowledge to that individual, that in the grip of despair it is not unusual for Satan to be much at work, desiring to draw those who hurt into a cave of darkness, away from the Light of God. Also, let them know that it may be nearly impossible for some to pray. Pray with them, pray for them, carry these souls upon your back to the very throne of God at a time when they can hardly whisper "help me" to their Father in heaven.

Sixth, I have also found it is always helpful to talk with despairing clients about the Lord's prayer; the prayer that has been their anchor and comfort during better days. Specifically, linger lovingly on the comforting implications of praying to the omnipotent God and ruler of the universe and calling him by name "Our Father." Gently remind the aching soul of the years he has spoken the petition, "thy will be done," trusting that God's will is good and just whether or not we may understand it. Call to remembrance how it is that God has guided him through the dry and weary lands of his personal history - never forsaking or betraying him. As God has been faithful then; He remains faithful now.

Then take on the devil's assaults and temptations head on. Patiently help us to draw our confidence and hope from the knowledge of the promises of God: that He will lead us *not* into temptation or any calamity. And help us to pray with surety that our God will deliver us from evil. For we are confident that God will indeed, defeat all evil in the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake.

Seventh, don't let anyone leave you empty handed. Be sure that you have uplifting resources for the hurting to take with them: Brief books, prayers, devotional pamphlets, even CDs of hymns. The Psalms of Lamentation are wonderful to help guide the personal prayers of those who suffer. If you're willing, print out Psalm 13 in handout fashion for them. At the beginning of Psalm 13 we find the plaintive cry, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?"

How long will you hide your face from me? And yet, the Psalm moves towards triumph and comfort in the closing verses, "But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord for he has been good to me. Psalm 90 and 91 are other well-received prayers.

Eighth, certainly you will want to bless us. There is nothing you cannot offer in blessing that God has already promised to give His children. We won't ask for this gift, but it is appreciated deeply, and it is most surely required. Pastors, place your hands on our heads, trace the sign of the cross on our foreheads and let us take comfort in the knowledge that God must be much at work in us, and for us, even if we can't detect it.

Ninth, understand that one conversation or one prayer does not constitute spiritual care. Know that the despairing are very needy, yet very reluctant to seek help. Know that solitude continues to render the despairing most vulnerable to the whispers and promptings of Satan. It's unlikely these folks will ask to see you again, but ensure that you set another time for a visit or a phone call. If you're able, write a note of encouragement or send an e-mail. I assure you they will keep what you've written and read it many, many times. They will require multiple visits, multiple conversations, and multiple prayers. And they will need to see you more than once a month. For you see, it is in *seelsorge*, soul care, not psychology that the love, mercy and caring of Jesus Christ is given to the baptized faithful through called servants. It is in individual care of the soul that we may be best able to allow Our Father in Heaven to console and to comfort us. It is in spiritual care that He prepares us to return to the Divine service where He wraps His arms around us in the Gospel we hear preached and gives us His own Life in the Holy Sacrament given us to eat and to drink

Finally, don't become discouraged in caring for us; don't become weary in doing good, don't become discouraged, even if we don't respond as in the manner you had hoped, or if we respond more slowly than you believe we should. On this side of eternity there will forever be suffering and despair, but our God has promised us His peace in the face of all worldly tribulations. Sometimes you may be the closest we can come to owning that peace. We may lean on you heavily because we can see you and hear you and we're confident that by listening to you we may hear what it is that God would say to us. Allow God to use your gifts of patience, mercy, and wisdom powerfully in service of those who are despairing.

Until our LORD comes again in glory, death will continue to seduce the living. Satan will remain much at work to undermine Christ's holy church on earth. Translate for us God's promises of hope so that we can find comfort and confidence in everything our Lord teaches. Be sure we hear the words of our LORD recorded in John 16:33, "I have told you all this so that you may have

peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”

This is a time of great possibility, for when we as a church talk candidly about suffering under the cross and explain clearly what the theology of the cross means, perhaps our Lord will enlarge even each of our souls with a spirit of thanksgiving; when take up our cross to live life in the midst of adversity, to the glory of God.

References:

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Every day, every night, as much as possible. I had other jobs, ones that paid, but those came and went and were just ways of making money, money that I would spend on a sea of bottles. I was alone and confused, carrying barbed memories from my childhood that squirmed in a thorny tangle inside my chest, but would stretch out through my mouth or up into my mind if I didn't battle them back down with alcohol. I didn't have any ambition, or any interest in finding my way. Being drunk and sad and alone was my job "and you know what? I didn't hate it. Being lost at sea was a comfort. "When people are suicidal, many times they're highly ambivalent. They're unsure about suicide," explains Wagner. "They're torn between a desire to live and a desire to die." If you suspect a loved one is considering taking his or her own life, be proactive in trying to get them help. After all, a successful intervention "one that results in a person getting the professional help they need" can strengthen a person's desire to live. Suicide hotlines can be effective. Thousands of people call Aetna's Resources For Living call centers every year for help with suicidal thoughts. But Wagner cautions that it's not enough to simply suggest a suicidal person pick up the phone. Your struggling loved one might only pay lip service to your suggestion. When looking at the motivations of the characters in the Bible who either committed suicide or were suicidal, their reasons are also sinful. Whether it be fear, pride, anger, or simply refusing to hope God will make the future better than the present, the reasons for suicide are based on feelings, rather than God's promises, even though, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). Believing the lies of the heart rather than God's truth does turn some toward suicide. When it begins to take over the heart, it is important to remember that is the result of living in a fallen world. The thief - the devil - seeks to steal joy, kill hope, and destroy the believer. The suicide of a patient can be devastating to the family and to the family physician. The patient's death may shake the physician's confidence, undermine any willingness to work with patients with a mental illness, and provoke professional and legal review. In an attempt to help the family physician prevent suicide, this article reviews known risk factors and offers a strategy for assessing these factors in individual patients. The authors outline interventions that fit the existing level of risk and provide suggestions for the physician in the event of a completed suicide. The patient's death may shake the physician's confidence, undermine any willingness to work with patients with a mental illness, and provoke professional and legal review.