

WORKING FOR LOVE

According to Greek mythology, Sisyphus was once a cruel King of Corinth. And when he died, he was eternally condemned to push a giant boulder to the top of a steep hill. The closer he got to the top, the steeper the hill became, and the harder it was to push the boulder. Every time he had almost gotten the boulder to the top of the hill, he would lose control of it. It would roll over him and down to the bottom of the hill, where he would have to start all over again. On this Labor Day weekend I hope that none of you are feeling like Sisyphus. I hope that you don't wake up every morning feeling like you have to push a giant boulder up a hill.

Like the teacher who was complaining about her job. She told about her principal who was lecturing the faculty quite unmercifully. One by one, he presented them with a painful list of all their failures, flaws and shortcomings. He chided them for over an hour for all the mistakes they had made over the year. Then he announced that the science club was sponsoring a blood drive and that he would donate the first pint of blood. An anxious voice piped up from the rear of the room and asked, "But whose blood?" I hope your work environment is a little better than that. At least I hope your boss is a little more sympathetic. But there is another side to the workplace, the employer's side. According to a story in USA TODAY a while ago, excuses for being absent or late to work are becoming more creative. Accountemps, a New York temporary help firm, polled executives about the most bizarre excuses they've heard. Some of the winners were: "My favorite actress just got married, and I needed time alone;" "there was a bear on my street;" "I had to sort my socks;" "The wind was blowing against me;" "A plane landed on the highway;" and one employee, opting for honesty, wrote, "I just forgot to come to work."

Certainly work is an important part of our lives. It takes a great part of our time and most of our energy. As someone has said, things are so hectic nowadays that we are no longer human beings, but human doings. We know Jesus worked hard. Indeed, work followed him everywhere he went. He cherished getting away for a little rest and spiritual nourishment just like we do. In our lesson for today it is evident that this is what he was looking for: a time for personal retreat, for prayer "a time away from the crowds in a place where he thought he would not be recognized." Mark says, "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there."

But Jesus' plans were interrupted almost at once. News of his presence had gotten out, and a woman came to him who needed his help. And this brings us to the first thing we need to say today: PAIN IS UNIVERSAL. If Jesus felt that by going into unfamiliar territory he could insulate himself from people in distress, he was wrong. People with problems are everywhere.

Years ago there was a Methodist Bishop named Cavanaugh. In one of his pastorates he met a physician who was a skeptic. Their work brought them into contact with each other quite regularly, and soon they became friends. One day as Cavanaugh was walking down the street; the physician pulled his buggy up to the curb and invited him for a ride. They talked about the weather for a bit, but then the doctor asked a rather pointed question: "Preacher you and I are good friends, but you puzzle me. How can a man of your intellectual ability spend his life telling 'old wives' tales' of God's love and the resurrection of Jesus???" Cavanaugh thought for a moment, and then said this: "Suppose in your younger days you had a cancer and a man came to you who claimed that he had a prescription that had cured many cancers, and he wanted you to try it. Suppose you had accepted it, and it had cured you. What would people think of you if you would not take that same prescription to every patient of yours who had cancer?"

At once the doctor said, "They would think I was a fool." The bishop looked at him very seriously, and said: "Twenty-five years ago I had a cancer, not a physical cancer. I suppose you could call it a moral cancer. The Great Physician gave me a prescription for my illness that cured me. So what would you think of me if I didn't take that prescription to every single person that I could possibly reach who needed it, every person who has some great heartache or sin that needs healing?" After a long, thoughtful silence the doctor answered: "I guess I would have to say that you were a fool." Very shortly afterwards the doctor accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord. Then the two friends teamed up and helped heal many souls in this world.

Pain is universal. There is a world of need all around us. There is no place on this earth that is so privileged that there are not people there who need what Christ alone can provide. Pain is universal. But here is the second thing we need to see: SO IS GOD'S LOVE.

The woman who wanted to meet Jesus that day had everything going against her. She was what was called a "Syrophoenician," which was a racial term suggesting that she was not accepted by either Gentiles or the Jews. Furthermore, the simple fact that she was a woman meant that she had no legal rights. To add to all of this, she had a daughter who was infected with what Mark calls an "Unclean Spirit."

This woman might have been an outsider, but she was also a person of faith. She saw God's power at work in Jesus, and so she asked him to help her daughter. But Jesus answered her in a shocking way. He said, "You must let the children have all they want first. It is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. This disturbing statement by Jesus reflected Jewish sentiment in that day toward outsiders. But the woman was persistent and wise. She said, "Yes, Lord, I know, but even the dogs under the table eat what the children leave." That must have been a satisfying answer because Jesus said, "For saying that, you may go, the demon has left your daughter." And the woman returned home and discovered that her daughter was well.

A young student came to his rabbi and asked, "Rabbi, how can we tell exactly the moment when night has ended and day has begun? Is it when it is so light that we can no longer distinguish a star in the morning sky?" The rabbi answered, "No my son, this is not how we tell." "How then can we tell?" asked the student. The rabbi said, "We know that night has ended and the day has begun when we look into the face of the stranger next to us and recognize that stranger to be our brother or our sister. Until that moment, we have spent our lives in the darkness, but at that moment, we have awakened into the light of day." Jesus looked into the eyes of a Syrophenician woman, saw a sister in distress and he responded. He showed her the love of God. One of the hardest lessons we learn is that the Gospel is about loving people. All people. Everywhere. God's love is universal. When we reach out to others who are in pain we are doing the work of God.

A couple named George and Hope experienced great pain when their daughter was killed while riding the subway. But instead of letting the pain dominate their lives, they decided that they would help others who have experienced similar tragedy in their lives. They now spend much of their time writing letters to other parents who have also experienced the death of one of their children. They write their messages of hope and encouragement from the unique experience of someone who has been in their shoes, even though they both know that no one can truly know the pain of another. They share a genuine concern to help people who are hurting, and people often respond to their concern, sometimes writing a letter of gratitude in return.

Yes, pain is universal. But through people like George and Hope, God's love is made manifest. And this brings us to our final point: **GOD'S LOVE IS AVAILABLE TO ALL OF US.** If it is true that God's love is universal, then it also means that it is available to you and me whoever we may be, whatever our background, regardless of what we may have done.

This Labor Day weekend we need to remind ourselves that Jesus is still working. He will never take a vacation as long as there are people who need him. He is looking for people who are hurting, people who are lonely, people who are bound by addictions of every kind. And he is telling them, "Come to me. I can help you. I can help you today." Pain is universal, but so is the love of God. And that love is available to you and me. All we have to do is ask.