

Theology for those struggling with the disease.

TO A STRUGGLING FRIEND

Rev. Dr. Deborah Rahn Clemens

I have wanted to talk to you for a long time. I have a lot I want to say. I hope you can take a few moments to read this. Even though I can't say that I know how you feel. No one can. I do believe I have spent a good number of years trying to imagine it.

I know you don't know me and you and I probably have never met. But I did know someone once with whom you might have issues in common. I want to share some of the things I hope may help to boost your spirit. They are insights and thoughts we can draw from because we are Christians.

Yes, I know talking about Jesus etc. might make you kind of nervous. I understand that. That is because somewhere along the line people have gotten the idea that Christians are too often moralists, that they have set notions of what is good and who is bad. A few might think ministers would try to preach about hell and damnation if they had a congregation of addicts. Perhaps even you would fear that the people you remember from your days of going to church would judge you, be afraid of you, if they knew the extent of your sickness.

Of course, I can't speak for them. I can't guarantee that some people who call themselves "Christian" wouldn't act like jerks around this subject. Sorry about that. What I can say for sure is that any notion that Christianity is about judgement, exclusion, self-righteousness, or unforgiveness is just a lot of crap! The truth is Christianity should be exactly the opposite. That is because Christianity is all about sharing in the life of Jesus. And Jesus is about love and grace and inclusion. That's what I want to talk about: HIM.

Jesus hung out with "riff raff." That's what the establishment folk of his time might have called them. He had a real reputation for seeking the company of the very kinds of persons mothers might warn are a bad influence. For instance, He let a prostitute fawn all over him at a snobby dinner party when he was a guest. He downed plenty of wine with shifty characters and social misfits. When challenged he even said: "I have not come to call respectable people but outcasts". (Mark 2:17) Furthermore he never shied away from people who had scary and even fatal diseases. The writer of Matthew said: "The news about him spread ... so that people brought all those who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and afflicted with all sorts of troubles : people with demons, and epileptics, and paralytics _____ Jesus heal them all." (Matt 4: 24). If you think that's something, He also met up with, touched even, lepers, who had a gross and incurable skin condition (Mark 1: 40-45). He spoke with a guy so crazed he was running around naked! Look it up yourself if you don't believe it. (Luke 8: 26-39) If Jesus wasn't afraid to associate with all of them, why would you be any different?

Jesus knew a lot about suffering. Maybe Jesus didn't have the exact disease that you have. But he wasn't immune. He was not detached. He wasn't like those professional folks who prescribe cures but can't begin to understand. Jesus never wore PPE's for self-protection! He had a rough existence. He grew up poor. He was in trouble with the law on a regular basis. Some believed he was raging mad. (Mark 3:20-23) He was tempted, badly tempted. (Matthew 4:1-12). He was homeless, mocked and

beaten. He was ratted on and abandoned by his closest friends. Eventually Jesus was unjustly put to death. I think, over all, however, the greatest reason for his suffering was because he had so much compassion for others. It pained him to know how badly they were lost, confused, and helplessly in need of salvation. (Luke 19: 41-44) Lost, confused, and helplessly in need of salvation: sounds like addiction, doesn't it?

Jesus turned to meditation to help him. We know he prayed constantly. He prayed when he was in the wilderness for forty days. He was for forty days totally alone and outside his normal element. I wonder if you or somebody else doing that 30 to 40-day stint in an inpatient rehab might feel you could relate to him? We know Jesus prayed routinely, as a kind of everyday discipline. He prayed when he was afraid of what was going to happen to him. He prayed out loud in the minutes before dying. Among other things he said, "Father! In your hands I place my spirit!" Dare I suggest that is a perfect prayer for one who is addicted.

In addition to prayer, Jesus turned to the Bible of his time to find solace. He loved the book of Psalms. He probably had memorized a lot of them. We know he recited Psalms while hanging on the cross. From Psalm 31 he quoted: In you, O Lord I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. (Ps 31: 1) But the most startling, blood chilling words he recited come for the 22nd Psalm: My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? Oh my God I cry by day, but you do not answer: and by night, but find no rest. (Ps 22: 1-2) Oh my God, can you believe it? Even Jesus, Holy Jesus felt abandoned by GOD NONETHELESS! So, if you know what that's like: to pray a prayer of desperation and feel like God is not hearing, I beg you to commiserate with Jesus.

Then, read the rest of that Psalm for I am sure that Jesus knew and sang every word in the same way people today might know every word of a song or a hymn. READ IT. It will take you on a journey through the valley of the shadow of death to a whole new realization that: God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted: he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried out to him.... Dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. To him, indeed shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I SHALL LIVE FOR HIM. (Ps 22: 24, 28-29)

So, maybe you are thinking, if Jesus prayed like that and died anyway, wasn't his prayer useless? No, I don't think so. Maybe you are secretly worrying about your own death, about losing your battle with addiction even though you've been praying and praying. Here's the things about death. Death for us is a normal process. Remember the old saying about the only things guaranteed in life are death and taxes? The fact is we are all going to die someday. Tragically many die too young and substances may be the cause of it. I hope death doesn't come on you any time yet. But for us humans it is going to happen. Death is a natural event.

However, death was not natural to God. God does not die, right? God is eternal, true? God is, for Pete's sake, God! It was the fact that God doesn't die and we do that has always separated us from Him. It has kept us apart, kept us in many ways' strangers making prayer so very hard. That is until the coming of Jesus. Jesus Christ, Christians believe, is God 100%. We also believe Jesus is 100% a mortal human being. How does that happen? Don't bother to do the math. It is a phenomenon only God can pull off. It's not for us to understand. We believe God chose to become human precisely to bring an end to that separation. Jesus alone is that link between earth and heaven. He linked up perfectly well in

his living, teaching, and healing. However, that unity could never be complete if Jesus had escaped or been spared of death. If he hadn't died like the rest of us all die, he wouldn't be real human being. Get it? He chose to die. He died so there could be no division between us and him ever again. We call that At One Ment (Atonement).

So, when we say Jesus died for us that is what we mean by it. But the good news is not over. The scriptures and creeds tell us that He went to hell and back to reach even those who hated God and turned their back on him. Jesus descended into hell to find men and women most assumed were eternally damned. He was pretty busy in those three days, I guess. There are a lot of people in hell right now and there were plenty back then. Maybe you've met some of them. Maybe you yourself can say you've known the hell of addiction.

You are not beyond the reach of Christ's outstretched hand. You can never be lost no matter how long you've been down in the pit. You see nothing can separate us from God, not even hell. And, it's never too late for God to go and find you and bring you back. Death is not a deal breaker for the Lord of life and all creation. That's a miracle, Yes?

Hold on. There is more. Christians believe Jesus rose again. He died a real death, but God, his heavenly Father, wasn't about to leave his only begotten Son to rot away in some coffin. God raised Jesus up and chose to bring him, Human and all, back into his holy abode in heaven. Great! Alleluia! That's where he belonged. But, because of love, that could happen with only one condition. Can you imagine conditioning God? Jesus would ascend to that place of eternal glory and bliss ONLY ONLY if he could bring his people with him.

If not, what would have been the whole point of his coming? Jesus came, (remember) to end that awful separation that existed between the Almighty and us pitiful weaklings. He did a great job while he lived. He died so that even death wouldn't break that connection. So, had he drawn the line there and said "BYE BYE" I'm out of here and going back to social distancing," the whole act of love would have been one big sham. God doesn't love for a little bit. Love is all God is. Therefore, heaven's doors have been opened wide ever since then. Those pearly gates are going to swing open to include any one who will cling to Jesus.

That includes you. Christ is determined to take you with him to heaven. It is God's will. It is your destiny. It comes with no strings attached. Don't let anyone tell you that St. Peter (or anyone else) guards the door with a check list itemizing what's good and who's bad. If you even suggest that you are not good enough for God, I'll tell you you are full of crap. No crap, no matter what, will scare away Jesus.

So, my dear struggling friend, this might not fix your present condition. This love letter may not keep you from relapsing again. The words I have shared may not insulate you from enduring both physical and psychological hard times ahead. But, please know that whatever you bring into your lungs will never be stronger than the fresh breath of Jesus Risen. Whatever you shoot into your veins, it can't transfuse the blood of Christ poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Whatever you ingest into you mouth, it can not out last the living bread than came down for heaven. Take and eat, take and drink, in remembrance of Him. Receive the Holy Spirit until you have finally found the Peace of Christ that only he can give.