In the Midst of Suffering

By the Rev. Mary Earle

Some years ago, I was invited to speak at the annual conference of the Episcopal Women of the Diocese of Alabama. We were gathering at Mentone, a center in the foothills of the Appalachians that extend into northern Alabama. That first night, the women officers of their diocesan ECW invited me to dinner at a house on the mountain. It was a happy gathering, and I visited with these new friends in the kitchen as the meal was prepared.

Afterward, as we were cleaning up, I struck up a conversation with an older woman. She mentioned in passing that her daughter-in-law and her grandson had come to live with her. While she was clearly glad for their company, I could sense that there was some sadness as she spoke. It turned out that in the prior six months, this woman’s husband had died of a heart attack, and then her son was killed in a car wreck. “I am so sorry,” I said, fumbling for words. “That’s a lot of loss in such a short time.” She looked at me kindly and said, “Well, it is. And you know, the fact is that everybody has something. That’s just how life is. I have friends, and I have my community. These women have seen me through a lot. We know grace shows up at the worst of times.”

She did not know that at that moment, my 31-year-old son Bryan was in treatment for brain cancer. She did not know that he had had a second recurrence, and that we were now looking toward his eventual death. She did not know that we were living with the acute suffering of watching that beautiful man begin to die. Nor did she know that I was just months away from having to take a disability retirement due to chronic illness. So her conversation came more as godly counsel than as advice. She was telling me her lived experience. Tragedy, suffering and heart-break had come her way. And yet, she did not feel comfortless. Yes, she felt sad. Yes, at times she felt overwhelmed. Yes, she felt the huge absence of the earthly presence of her son and her husband.

And yet.

And yet. She also perceived grace in the midst of all of that pain. Grace was tightly woven with the grief and the loss.

In an odd and singularly remarkable way, this conversation felt to me like the Visitation — that lovely passage in the Gospel of Luke in which the older, aged Elizabeth, heavily pregnant with the baby who will become John the Baptist, is greeted by the newly-pregnant Mary, the mother of Jesus. (Luke 1:39-56) In that encounter, those women exchange
something far deeper than words. They share the fact of new life, coming into being, through the mercy and grace of God. They share the fact of participating bodily in a path of life. They are filled with joy, and also with trepidation.

That moment of discovering the new life moving within them is also a moment of uncertainty, of vulnerability, of recognizing that life is perilous. After all, in that day and age, many were the pregnant women who died of complications in childbirth. To be pregnant was also to be ready to give your life for the baby. Life and loss are intertwined from the get-go. Suffering is implicit in the mystery of gestation.

Later, some 30 years later, long after baby John and baby Jesus have been weaned and toilet trained and can walk on their own, both mothers will experience the acute suffering of a parent knowing the death of a child. Both will know that ache in the marrow, that taut iron band of grief. Both will come to live with death of their offspring. In each case, these sons will not only die; John and Jesus will suffer violent death. In John’s case, the beheading ordered by King Herod at the whim of his wife. In Jesus’ case, the horror of being scourged, reviled and crucified. We know Mary witnessed this death of her son. And perhaps Elizabeth lived long enough to have to bear the news of her son’s beheading.

The gospel narratives give us the strong medicine of reminding us that we followers of Jesus are never exempt from suffering. Embodying the life of the Risen Lord draws us more deeply into real life — with all of its beauty and tragedy, its glory and violence. We learn that love is willing to go toward another’s pain and despair. We learn that this life of baptismal dying and rising is carried out with fellow pilgrims, and that we bear each others sorrows and distress.

It is a peculiar and problematic habit of the church in the United States that many who call themselves Christians believe that belonging to this faith results in a life with no problems. No pain. No divorce. No bankruptcy. No wars. No bombs going off in airports. No limbs being amputated. No horrible car wrecks. No doctor sitting before you, trying to find the right words to say, “We cannot do anything else for you.” This version of Christianity is, quite frankly, a lie.

My friend from Alabama knew the truth: “Everybody’s got something.”

She knew that this human life, with its ragged edges and frayed seams, its rent garments, is nevertheless shot through with glory and grace. She knew that grace glimmers through, even in the darkest times. As she said to me on that mountaintop, “Isn’t that part of what the cross tells us? That God is always with us in our pain and suffering? That the Lord dwells right there in all that muck and mess?”

Over the years of my priestly life, I have offered spiritual direction. One of the difficult distortions of the culture’s version of Christianity is this assumption that with baptism comes a “pass” on pain and suffering. Admittedly there are some religious leaders, particularly on television and other media, who encourage belief in a gospel that results in
personal advancement, personal gain, personal wealth, personal health. The odd thing about this distortion is that it fails to take something pretty basic into account: we are mortal. We are born and we die. We live numbered days, and we do not know how many days that may be. This distortion shies away from Good Friday. It rushes through the gospel narratives, heading straight for resurrection.

Suffering and loss, violence and war, devastating flood and bombs in marketplaces are deadening. And strangely, those are the passages in which our illusions of self-sufficiency break down. We are led to see grace in the community of the Body of Christ, in which prayer is offered with such generosity. We are led to see the Risen Lord in the face of the stranger who offers to help. We are prompted to discover anew that all of our puny little categories for divine mercy and compassion are simply inadequate to contain the infinite goodness made known to us in Jesus.

Recently, my brother Bill was killed in a car accident in Austin, an accident caused by a drunk driver. In late February, not three months later, my other brother Tom contracted a dangerous staph infection and had to endure the amputation of his lower right leg and a subsequent heart attack. That was followed by the placement of five stents in his heart. Our family is still reeling.

And yet.

And yet, we have been held steady in the prayers of so many. Not only Episcopalians — Christians of all stripes, Jews, Muslims, friends across the interfaith spectrum. In both instances, people who did not know either Bill or Tom stepped forth in great kindness and professional care. Grace poured forth, anointing wounds of grief, of suffering, of physical disfigurement.

Is this hard? Yes. Are there easy answers? No. Are we traveling in a company, remembering that life is a gift, and each day has its own cherished blessings? Yes.

Everybody’s got something. That is the truth.

The invitation is to be with one another, helping to carry the suffering and to be on the watch for grace — in the ICU, in the flooded town, at the site of the explosion. For even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

Questions for reflection:

Spend some time thinking about the trials that have come to you and try to identify "Everybody’s got something." What "somethings" have come into your life? How was God present in each one. Did you recognize that at the time or later?
Is there a difference between the grace you experience during the hard times and the grace you experience during the good times?

“Many who call themselves Christians believe that belonging to this faith results in a life with no problems,” says Mary Earle. How do you explain (to yourself and others) that this is not always the case?