

Holding Pain's Hand

PURSUING INCLUSION TO CREATE A WHOLE CHURCH

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She carried her hand tucked between her stomach and her arm. Hidden. Ashamed. I didn't know what it was like to have a lame hand, but I did know what it was like to carry an arm as a burden. Thousands of miles across land and sea, I had felt the weight of my shoulder on my neck as it hung in a post-op sling three separate times. I knew what it was like to beg God to let me die because of pain doctors couldn't solve. I knew what it meant to choose what I did not choose, only to have others define me by my limitations anyway.

But there in that Bolivian village, my arm extended in empathy toward the burden this girl still carried. I took her hand in mine. With the same hand that used to throb with searing nerve pain, I stroked a vibrant aqua onto the nails of the hand she had been taught to view as damaged. I couldn't tell Susanna why that manicure meant so much to me, but in the realm where heart speaks to heart, she knew. The lack of reservation with which I grabbed her hand told her the truth: She was loved and she was whole.

Pain is not beautiful, but for me, it has been purposeful. Pain grabs our hand to tell us something we need to know, something that isn't right. So often, we don't get to choose when pain enters our lives. Sometimes we're born with a condition the world labels a deformity, like Susanna, or sometimes a freak accident leaves us with a rotting biceps, like me.

Pain does not discriminate; it affects us all without favoritism. Pain without purpose sucks us dry; pain in isolation melts away the resolve to live. We feel despair when we grab pain with both hands and don't leave one free to take Jesus's hand. But Jesus came so that instead of holding pain with both hands, we could hold his hand and pain at the same time. Sometimes Jesus will command pain to drop our hand and give us peace as it departs from us, but more often than not, he walks with us as he lets pain lead the way.

What would it look like if the church followed the example of Jesus, our Savior? When we decide that another's pain is too difficult to understand or someone is too disabled for our pews, we lose the very miracle that is the body of Christ. Maybe in our own pain we can be a warm,

sweaty hand noticing and reaching for another's hand with a jar of nail polish.

God told Moses that he was the one who created the mute and the blind (see Exodus 4:11), yet we dismiss the parts of his creation who seem too messy to love. God is calling us to rise up and become the radically inclusive church. As long as we refuse to see who is missing from our chairs and absent from our small groups, the painful irony is that the church will walk with a limp. Allowing the disabled to remain marginalized, the church becomes disabled itself.

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With practical action, the daunting task of inclusion can be achieved through small acts of obedience. If we drive our blind neighbor to church, take the person we meet at the coffee shop to her chemo appointments, or address from the pulpit the complexities of healing from which our complacency runs, the church's body will begin to heal. If we take Susanna's hand without hesitation, perhaps she will carry it without shame.

It's time for us to take the hand of Jesus and open our arms to the ones who need us. Jesus already held pain with both hands; he felt the eternal despair of being separated from God for our sake, and he rose again so that we could grab his hand and show others how to do the same. ■



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