Written Meditation March 2017

Dear Franciscan Brothers and Sisters,

For Franciscans, love and suffering is the pathway to God. To understand God’s involvement in a world of sorrow from a Franciscan point of view, is to consider how love combines with suffering in the crucified Christ. As you remember, Francis was initially repulsed by the sight of lepers and this seems only natural. But later, Francis kisses the lepers and even lives with them. Why? Why would anyone want to kiss a leper? This is not easy to answer so let’s look at the way Francis experiences the crucified Christ. While he was standing before the San Damiano cross, Francis was overwhelmed with love and compassion for the passion of Christ and he carried that love and compassion with him for the rest of his life. Francis was so touched by the compassionate love of God. He knew God was bending over in love in the wounds of Jesus that Francis became the compassion of God in the world.

I am sure you all heard the expression that in order to know a person, you must “get into their skin and walk around in it for a while.” Compassion is so deeply connected to others that a truly loving person will breathe in another’s pain and breathes out compassion. He identifies so closely with the suffering of others that he or she makes space in their heart to allow the suffering person inside and embraces them with arms of love.

The cross signifies the wedding between God and the world ~ or us and He does this through His suffering and death. I have always loved this quote from St. Bonaventure:

Christ on the cross bows his head waiting for you, that he may kiss you; His arms outstretched, that he may embrace you; his hands are open, that he may enrich you; his body spread out, that he may give himself totally; his feet are nailed, that he may stay there; his side is open for you, that he may let you enter there.

Suffering is not the consequence of sin but the place of transformation. It is a door by which God can enter in and love us where we are, in our human weakness, our misery and our pain. When we let go of our defenses, our egos and our walls, God can embrace us in the fragile flesh of our humanness. As St. Clare explained it, God bends down in the cross to share our tears, out of a heart full of mercy and love ~ and we are caught up in his embrace.

According to St. Bonaventure, suffering is God’s way of being involved with creation because suffering is the most authentic expression and communication of love. There is no other path into the heart of God than through the burning love of the crucified Christ.

In the suffering and death of Jesus we find the power to love in the midst of suffering because love is stronger than death. The more one loves, the more one is open to sorrow. Too often we want a God who will hear our cries and will be strong enough to push our bad experiences away. God is not deaf to our cry. It is rather that God himself is weeping. As we cry out to God, He answers, “I am here!” It is a humble God who bends low to us and says to us that God lives in human hearts. God needs human hands, human eyes and human touch.

Only when we let go of our private lives and enter into the pain and misery of others does the cross take on the transformative power of God’s love. God needs selfless vessels to pour out his selfless compassionate love. As Secular Franciscans we have an enormous power to heal this wounded world through the power of compassionate love, the love that is not afraid of what is sick and ugly but accepts the suffering of frail and weak humanity and embraces it as its own. The power of God’s healing love belongs to us if we choose to accept its demands.

The material for this audio was inspired by Chapter Five in the book, "The Humility of God” by Sister Ilia Delio, OSF.

We hope this brief meditation helps us all reach our most important goal ~ the reason we entered the Franciscan Order in the first place… to grow into a more intimate relationship with God. The speaker in this audio is Marie Thomas, Regional Minister of the Five Franciscan Martyrs Region and the technical support was provided by G. Lamar Thomas.