



THE BARNABAS LETTER

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Redemption out of Suffering

• INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Page 2

The Open Way

Meredith Spatola

Page 4

Touches of Grace

Todd Gaylord

Page 8

Upcoming Events



By Meredith Spatola

Meredith is a counselor and teacher at the Barnabas Center. She is married to Jon and mother to Charlotte .

The Open Way

The summer after I turned ten, my granddad took my sister and me to play a full round of golf at our local course. The trip was one of his many attempts to instill in us a love for the game. His spoken hope was that I would one day have a glittering spot on the LPGA tour, but his deeper secret was that he simply wanted more time with us. I now know the precious gift of his deep and consistent enjoyment of me, but I am sure that on that day, I was full of complaints about walking eighteen holes in the South Carolina heat with my kid sister.

As my sister teed off about midway through the round, I happened to be standing too close to her. As she came back with her swing, her driver collided with my collarbone. I clearly remember the instant shock and burst of pain that radiated from my chest. I screamed, of course, but what happened next was strange. I began to run, clutching my collarbone, while my granddad chased me, trying to help me. I was in full survival flight mode, and refused to allow him or my mom to examine my collarbone. I reluctantly allowed a doctor to help me, but I stayed braced even on the examining table for what I feared would be more pain.

The burst of shocking pain, followed by flight and a refusal of help be-

came a pattern for me, and this pattern may be familiar to you as well. In fact, if you pay attention, you will find that it's almost instinctual for children to run to their caregiver for comfort after falling down or getting hurt, but to also shield their bloody scrape from any intervention.

This is what we do - we clench, brace, and hunker down over our wound, trying to nurse and protect it from the further pain that opening may bring. In our own shaken way, we know that if we allow someone to help, the pain may get worse, because the wound may open up deeper when being cleaned, or the setting of the bone may be excruciating. Our first instinct in suffering is to judge the experience as terrible, and then to shield ourselves from anyone or anything that might increase the agony. I long to handle my suffering differently than this, but is there any hope of walking through suffering in an open way?

Open to Opportunity

The longer I sit with clients, friends or just my own thoughts, the more aware I become that we find a tremendous amount of safety in our judgments. We tend to think of being judgmental as it relates to other people, but we judge almost everything, from another person, to ourselves, to an experience and the

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emotions we feel in the experience. As we take in an experience, instead of remaining curious and open, we immediately categorize it, based on what it feels like, how familiar it is, or what it means we need to do next. When we assign an internal judgment to an experience, a fortress instantly springs up inside of us, a place to put something we do not understand or something that makes us afraid. We are no longer open at all.

Nothing shuts down our ability to receive, grow or be curious about what God might have for us like judging does, and our judgments are loud when we hurt. We feel pain and instantly scramble for a way to make sense of it, a map to get us out of the valley. "This is such a nightmare," "I can't cope with this; I never thought I would have to..," "God has left me here" are all very common judgments we make about the situation, our ability to walk through it, and God's heart for us. There is a place deep inside of us that is convinced that the experience of bad pain will kill us or cause our hearts to die.

But the Father is not threatened by suffering as we are. In fact, He will draw us deeper into the desert to get more of our hearts in and through our suffering. This is the promise of Hosea - that He will *'lead us into the valley of deep trouble to build for us a doorway of hope'*. (Hosea 2:14-20) We judge and self-protect; He invites us to be open.

Recently I have been walking with two friends through suffering that was shocking and frightening for them. I find myself praying that God will bring the grace to allow them to remain open. I pray this because I know my own response has always been to close down over the wound, and because I believe that remaining open in the heat of pain is the most difficult choice we make.

The unexpected gift we find is that suffering - instead of burying our

hearts, actually causes our hearts to become more spacious. If we can suspend judgment, sit still for awhile and allow God and others to enter the wound, we will walk out of the valley of the shadow of death more capable of loving without fear, more likely to offer our presence instead of our competence to others who hurt, and more desiring of God's presence than of what He can do for us. In the valley, we develop the emotional muscle to be able to be present, instead of fearing future possibilities or obsessing about our past. Perhaps most significantly, we have the opportunity to get comfortable with the mystery of God's storytelling and we see that it is a deeply good thing that we are not in control.

Open to Release

You and I walk through months and years carrying with us desires for our lives. Some of us feel these keenly, and others less so, but we are each driven to hope for good things for ourselves and the people we love. Our longings can become demands so quickly, and we often believe we *must* have what we deeply desire. Few things expose our demand that life be good, like heartbreak does.

When shattering comes, the kind, powerful presence of the Spirit makes a way for us to unclench our fists and let the life we demanded slip through. Actual quiet and rest begins to build in us as we make peace with the truth that our story on this earth does not have to work out as we have so desperately wanted it to, *only* because heaven is a real place of coming home to all that we have longed for. And we will be sustained now until we can live fully then.

This is far from easy - it may involve an hourly choice on our part, and it does not mean that we stop looking for good in this life. It means that heaven, our life in the presence of our Creator and Father, has to be very real to us, very often. We will

(Continued on page 7)

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By Todd Gaylord

Todd lives in Charlotte with his three children. He is an ex-bond trader and real estate entrepreneur, but has not yet returned to work. Todd blogs at toddgaylord.com.

Touches of Grace

A few weeks ago I finalized the design of my wife's headstone. It reads, "Sydney Boone Gaylord; Daughter of the King; Magnetic, Vivacious, Spontaneous, and Ultra-Creative Spirit. April 13, 1976 - August 29, 2011." It remains difficult to believe that my high school sweetheart, who I married immediately after college, and have three beautiful children with, would be taken from me so abruptly after only thirteen years of marriage.

The suffering of battling a brain tumor for the past three years has been brutal. Scenes of pain and suffering are cemented in my mind that I wish I could forget, and would be cruel to share. Now that she has passed, I miss my best friend, my lover and my partner. My identity as a person, and nearly every part of my daily existence is forever altered. Every decision, from what to have for dinner, to what to do on a Saturday is different, and feels unnatural. My kids miss their mom. It's hard for adults to even imagine how pervasive a mother is in a child's life. Try to read a children's book, or sit in an elementary school class without mention of one. Practically, though I have the help of a nanny, I have had to learn to do laundry, take special notice of the kid's emotions, schedule playdates, doctor appointments, carpools, and get involved in the kids education, and day to day schedule.

I would like to tell you about how God has redeemed the pain in our story. But, the truth is, I can't fully answer that question, *and I think this is an important part of addressing the issue*. The kids and I are still very much in the process of both hurting and healing and I am convinced that until we die, at least to some degree, we always will be.

I will say, however, that in the pain, God has offered special "touches of grace" to remind us that he is with us, and that our story is headed somewhere with our best interests and nothing short of the glory of God in mind. Two specific examples of "touches of grace" include God's provision of our nanny, Perren Rives, and a providential conversation with Sydney about her funeral and burial wishes.

Perren

In Sydney's last year, as we were trying to figure out childcare, my mom consistently brought up the name of a nanny in Raleigh, Perren Rives. Perren and I exchanged voicemails once, but I didn't give it much thought, mainly because she didn't seem very interested and she didn't live in Charlotte. Then, several months later, Perren seemed to develop interest, and at the same time I received an unsolicited but extraordinarily complementary reference from a cousin of mine, who also seemed determined to bring

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Perren to our home. So, in February 2011, Perren came to Charlotte to visit and discuss the possibility of nannying for our family.

As I look back, I joke with Perren that it was the most presumptuous interview I have ever conducted as she basically announced that God wanted her to have this job. If she wasn't so impressive I would have rejected her immediately, but I was left to either believe that A) she had literally no self-awareness or B) God really did want her here. The funny thing is that our previous nanny, Waverly, did basically the same thing and she also, turned out to be a provision from God.

Interestingly, Perren lost her dad when she was five, and struggling with his absence has become the linchpin of her testimony. In fact, I asked her mom which of her seven children were most affected by their father's death and she said, "without a doubt, Perren." It was immediately apparent that Perren saw, maybe more clearly than I did, the vulnerability of the kid's hearts as their mom struggled with a terminal illness. From her first day of work, she didn't need me or Sydney as a boss. Her heart was intrinsically oriented towards loving our children. If anything, we needed her guidance.

While, on one hand, Perren was serving us, her stint as our nanny provided her with a chance to redeem her own story. She was using her vision, empathy, and past wound to love three precious children headed down the same road. One evening Vail (8) said to me, "Perren told me that even though I don't have a mom, God will put special people in my life along the way," and another day, "Right now I'm more sad than happy, but I think when I'm Perren's age I'll be more happy than sad." Perren walked with us through the victory of Sydney's miraculous comeback, as well as her decline and death.

Fast forward to the last week of Perren's employment, only a few weeks ago. The kids and I were

celebrating Christmas morning by reading the Christmas story and opening a few presents. Perren came in the house about halfway through the process. Christmas music was blasting and the kids were busy engaging their new toys, which were strewn all over the house. Vail was busy with her duct tape craft kit that Perren had given her, and Boone (3) was playing his Paper Jamz Guitar. Haven (5) was dancing and moving to the music with her new glittering dollar store jewelry on.

When I looked at Perren she was pointing to the corner of the sun-room. I made a curious expression, and she pointed again. I rounded the corner and saw Vail standing with her back to me. She was facing the life-sized canvas print of Sydney in her aqua blue dress that I had made after her death. Vail was holding up a headband she had made out of various patterns of duct tape, trying to align the headband with the outline of Sydney's head in an attempt to picture it on her mom.

"Oh, Vail," I said, hugging her from behind. She smiled, as if proud of what she was doing. Haven saw us, and immediately sensed her mom's absence. She ran beside her sister and started crying next to her. As I comforted Vail and spoke to her, Perren picked up Haven and hugged her with the full force of her love. They were both holding each other tightly and crying.

This scene in my mind is a picture of a completed circle of redemption. Two five-year old hearts, wounded, but bound together because of their wound. There is literally nobody else on the planet who was more fit to comfort Haven in that moment than Perren.

Leaving our family was sad for Perren, mostly, she explained, because she knows how long the road of grief is, and how much is ahead of my children. She is quick to add, however, that she also knows the healing and redemption that God engineers through suffering. Perren

(Continued on page 6)

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has experienced so much growth and healing as a result of her wound that, as a part of her testimony, she will go as far as to say that she is thankful for her dad’s death and if she could reverse the course of her life, she would not do it. You can believe that we would not do it either.

The Conversation

Sydney’s prognosis was such that the doctors could not predict how much longer she would live. Her desire was to see our kids get married, and we consistently prayed for this. Based on my conversations with doctors, absent a healing from God, 5-10 years seemed to be a reasonable expectation. But after about two years, her condition worsened to the point where she was admitted to intensive care and I was told that she may not make it out of the hospital.

At this moment, while she lay unresponsive on the hospital bed, I looked at her with an overwhelming sense of regret. Except for a few song favorites, I did not know what she wanted for her funeral or where or how she wanted to be buried. I suddenly prayed a new prayer, which was, “Father, please don’t let this be it. Please give us more time together and give me the opportunity to ask her these questions.”

God answered the first part of my request by allowing her to survive that bout of brain swelling. However, the steroids she required over the next few months caused psychosis, and she was not able to mentally participate in any kind of serious conversation. I patiently looked for a window to talk with her.

In the Spring of 2011, after weaning her body from steroids, her clarity returned, and she made a comeback that earned her the name “Miracle Girl” in the doctor’s office. She soon was walking, driving, and doing nearly everything she did before. During this time we spoke about a potential funeral several times, and I got some details, but I wasn’t sure exactly what to ask, or

how to advise her on cremation versus burial, open versus closed-casket, etc.

So, I proposed that we set up a meeting with our pastor, Mark Upton, to discuss what we would want in the event of her funeral. After weeks of procrastinating, I finally set up this meeting for the morning of Thursday, August 25th at 10:00 a.m. By this time, Sydney’s condition had deteriorated again and we had just begun radiation treatment, the most aggressive treatment available for her condition.

As it turns out, this particular Thursday was a fantastic day for her. She felt good, her mind was clear, and she took on the conversation with ease. I was nervous about the discussion, not wanting to upset her or cause her to be fearful, but very much wanting to resolve the many outstanding questions that I knew I would be forced to answer without her in the event her health took a detrimental turn.

The conversation was a home run. It didn’t trigger fear at all. In fact, she genuinely became excited about the possibility of seeing Jesus face to face. We talked at length on her preferences. Later in the day she told a friend, “It was fun. I was planning my wedding.” Nothing could have been better for my soul. The load was finally lifted, and we were able to connect and bond over one of the most intimate and difficult topics two humans will ever discuss.

The next day, Sydney’s headaches and vomiting became uncontrollable, and I finally drove her to the ER about 5pm. After two traumatic days in the hospital, her brain stopped working, and she was pronounced dead on Monday, August 29th.

Because of our August 25th conversation, we were prepared to set up Sydney’s funeral as a celebration of her step over the threshold of eternity. It was a true honoring of her, which has helped me in my grief, and as a byproduct, affected

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many lives. I had several people tell me that Sydney's funeral was the most profound spiritual experience they have ever had. I received a voicemail from a distant relative who said that he has had a complete spiritual awakening in the past four months due to our story and Sydney's funeral. Just this past week I spoke with a family member who quit her job as an attorney to do non-profit work, because of the inspiration of Sydney's life. Recently, I met with a friend who is taking a serious look at God for the first time, because of Sydney's passing.

Conclusion

So, why did God answer my prayers to spare Sydney for another season and have an important conversation with her, and not our prayers for healing or for her presence at the children's weddings? Why did God allow my children to be so deeply wounded, yet provide a nanny providentially equipped to love them through it? I do not know.

(Continued from page 3)

need to release over and over again, as we feel fear and are tempted to seize control, and it is important to be patient with ourselves in this. We will not find our Father weary of this cycle within us or angry because we cannot seem to release once and for all.

Open to Wisdom

We shut down at the possibility of pain because we fear what walking through it will require of us. Even when we are not suffering, many of us allow possible future pain to have the power to haunt us. To live with the anticipation of having to walk through our own "worst case scenario" is to live afraid, demanding and braced.

A blessing comes when the pieces shatter on the floor around us and we are faced with the pain we did not want. Instead of anticipating pain, we are in the middle of

"As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in the mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things." (Ecclesiastes 11:5)

As I look back at the past, or dare to think about the future, I am comforted by a quote by Charles Spurgeon in his sermon on divine providence.

"Providence is wonderfully intricate. Ah! You want always to see through Providence, do you not? You never will, I assure you. You have not eyes good enough. You want to see what good that affliction was to you; you must believe it. You want to see how it can bring good to the soul; you may be enabled in a little time; but you cannot see it now; you must believe it. Honor God by trusting him."

it, and the gift we find here is that the suffering does not actually kill us as we thought it may. Paul talks about the reality of life continuing in the midst of suffering in his second letter to the Corinthian church. He speaks of deep affliction, but not to the point of being crushed, real sorrow, but not to the point of total despair, and heavy blows, but not to the point of destruction. (2 Corinthians 4: 7-16). He knew well what it meant for his outer life to be torn down while his inner life was being built.

We have the same Builder. We may be hurting deeply, but we have not lost our God-given capacity to make wise choices with our brokenness. We will always be given the grace to choose to take the next step, to let people in with us in our suffering, and to eventually experience celebration again in this life, even as we long for heaven.

**"...you cannot see it now;
you must believe it. Honor
God by trusting him."
Charles Spurgeon**

**"For nine long years, I
wrestled with God face to
face through story."**



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• UPCOMING OPPORTUNITIES:

<i>Date(s)</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Facilitator(s)</i>
Tuesdays from 2:00-3:30pm Group begins January 24	Training Ground: 10 week program for pastors who want to grow in their ability to care for those in their congregation through peer supervision, training in counseling and discussion with other pastors. Each week a different licensed professional counselor from our staff will share and train you in their area of expertise.	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
Thursdays from 6:00-8:00pm Group begins February 2	Healing Hearts: 14 week group for women who have experienced childhood harm. It provides a biblical, confidential context where women can wrestle with difficult realities related to their harm.	<i>Lauren Petters</i>
Mondays from 6:30-8:30pm Groups begin February 27	Barnabas Training Level One: 10 week program designed to extend what you learned during a <i>Barnabas Training Basic</i> weekend. Participants are placed in small groups to practice and learn new lay counselor skills with one another.	<i>Roger Edwards Meredith Spatola</i>
Saturday, April 14 from 9am-1pm at The Barnabas Center	Hope in the Darkness: new seminar to equip pastors and lay people to effectively help families impacted by mental illness focusing on depression and bipolar disorder. Topics include: how to recognize symptoms, different types of depression, issues of suicide and how people of faith can be deeply impacted.	<i>Meredith Spatola</i>
Now Enrolling Monthly	Honor's Program: group for men who struggle with sexually addictive behavior. Visit our new Honors Program webpage for details on groups and related services: www.thebarnabascenter.org/honors .	<i>John Pierce Kurt Zuiderveen</i>
Barnabas Center-Richmond, VA Groups will begin in January Barnabas Training Basic - April 20-21	Winter Groups at Barnabas Center-Richmond will include: Barnabas Training Level One and Healing Hearts (descriptions for each above). All groups begin in January. Barnabas Training Basic-Richmond: Friday night & Saturday lay counselor training. The training includes teaching and an interactive small group experience for participants to learn skills to help friends through difficulties. Location: 3rd Presbyterian Church. Email lould@thebarnabascenter.org for more information.	<i>Lisa Ould</i>