

**How to Overcome Compassion Fatigue**  
**A Sermon by The Rt. Rev. Kirk Stevan Smith**  
**V Bishop of Arizona**  
**September 12, 2021**

We have had some fantastic thunderstorms this monsoon season. I don't remember anything like it in the time I've lived in Arizona. As you sat through the electrical fireworks of the past few weeks you may have wondered, what would happen if that lightning struck my house? Do I have a lightning rod? Are my electrical appliances properly grounded?

These days we are also buffeted by storms of a different kind, as news of one disaster after another constantly barrage us --monster earthquake in Haiti, unbelievable suffering in Afghanistan, gigantic forest fires all over the west, epic hurricane destruction in the south, devastating flooding in the Northeast, whole families wiped out by Covid variants--the news seems to just keep getting worse, and as it does, our abilities to deal with contestant catastrophe, is stretched to the braking point. That, plus yesterday, we had to relive the emotional gut wrench of 9/11.

On Monday, this past Labor Day, My friend, Bishop of RI Nick Kniseley wrote to his flock:

*Usually, this time of year, on Labor Day weekend, I'd be writing a message encouraging you to unplug and relax in these final days of Summer. But this year, as much as we wanted to do so, national and global events and the resurgent pandemic make all that feel impossible. The sad truth is this is the second summer in a row that we can't take a breath.*

Although most of us are not affected by these events personally, we all feel their effects.

“There is a sense in which people’s coping reserves are sort of finite entities,” says Joe Ruzek, a PTSD researcher at Palo Alto University. “So if you have to cope a whole lot”—as so many people have to over the past year and a half—“you can kind of diminish your resources.”

We all seem to have PTSD and we are all suffering from compassion fatigue.

That fatigue results in increased levels of anxiety, depression, alcoholism and domestic violence. Our emotional homes feel like they have been struck by lightning, and there is no place for that negative energy to go.

3

A common reaction, and one that I am guilty of myself, is to say, I just can't take anymore. I'm going to turn off the TV or the computer and not think about it. Or I am just going to joke about it and dismiss it. One columnist I read tells about going to a party last week where people were looking at footage of Afghans desperately trying to hold onto military transport planes. Many broke out in laughter, "isn't that hilarious one said." That is what emotional overload can do to us!

As Christians, we don't have the option of escapism or denial. Jesus repeatedly tells us that we suffer together with anyone in the world who is suffering and that we cannot turn our backs on the world's pain, no matter how much we are tempted to do so. What does Jesus say? "In so much as you do things to these my <sup>brothers & sisters</sup> ~~brethren~~ you do it to me." Or as Pope Francis sums it up: "To ignore the world's suffering is to ignore God."

So how then do we respond without being psychically overwhelmed on one hand or emotionally deadened on the other?

I guess because I am a ham radio operator I am especially fond of electrical metaphors, and a good one comes from Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber who reminds us of the necessity of circuit breakers. When an electrical system is

overloaded, when you have too many devices plugged in, circuit breakers are tripped, preventing overheating.

*I think of that fuse box often these days, because friends, I just do not think our psyches were developed to hold, feel and respond to everything coming at them right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet, in real time every minute of every day. The human heart and spirit were developed to be able to hold, feel and respond to any tragedy, injustice, sorrow or natural disaster that was happening IN OUR VILLAGE, not in an entire nation or world.*

Her suggestion, which I think is a good one, is that instead of trying to respond to all the crises we are faced with, we focus on just one or two.

*In her words: Instead of putting our head in the sand, ask yourself the question-- what is mine to care about and what is mine not to care about. If you have a passion for raising funds for Haiti relief do that, if you would like to help an Afghan family setting in your community, do that, if you want to get involved in environmental causes, find ways of doing that.*

Her approach reminds me a lot of the story of the man who every morning would walk along the beach rescuing

stranded starfish and throwing them back into the ocean. An observer mocked him saying don't you know that all those starfish are going to die, there are thousands of them. But the man picked up another starfish and threw it to safety in the water saying, Yes, but this one won't!

Our Gospel lesson for today isn't really about suffering. But it does remind us that as followers of Jesus it is our duty to "pick our cross and follow him." Jesus always stands with the hurting and the forgotten, and we need to follow him into those places too. And it is interesting that when Jesus performs a healing miracle, he does so at a particular time and particular place. We saw a good example of this last Sunday when we heard an account of Jesus healing the sick. Remember that story? He doesn't just magically heal everyone who is sick all with a snap of his fingers, No, he interrupts his journey to comfort the frantic Syrophensian woman of Tyre. He doesn't heal all at once every deaf person in Galilee, instead he lays his hands on one particular person, a man in a town of Sidon. Jesus reminds us of the importance of This person, this problem, this place. We can't take away all the world's pain but we can bring comfort to one person or a few persons.

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So instead of doing nothing, we can do something, and that something will keep our emotional circuit breakers from failing.

6

And every good electrician also knows that that part of electrical safety is being property grounded. When that lightning bolt hits a lightning rod, it is connected to ground, and passes through leaving the house unscathed. If there is no ground, the house blows up. If your TV is property grounded, you won't get a shock when you touch it.

We Christians claim to be grounded in Jesus Christ. That's because Jesus has experienced everything that we have and more, he is a good conductor for our pain, and grief, and our depression. We don't have to carry those things all by ourselves, those negative emotions can flow through us, and through Jesus, into the ground of our being, our creator God. God suffers with us, as well as with the animals of the burning forests, with the heartbroken people of Haiti and with the desperate refugees of Afghanistan, the flood victims of Louisiana. And if God suffers with them, so must we.

And we stand with them in hope. This is not the place for a sermon about the mystery of suffering, but this morning is a time for reaffirming our belief that we are called to share the pain of our brothers and sisters, but in a way in which we are not overcome and a way that brings hope to them.

7

The events of the past couple of weeks reminded me of the hope expressed in some of words of a poem by Amanda Gorman:

*So on this meaningful morn, we mourn and we mend.*

*Like light, we can't be broken, even when we bend.*

*We ignite not in the light, but in lack thereof,*

*For it is in loss that we truly learn to love.*

*In this chaos, we will discover clarity.*

*In suffering, we must find solidarity.*

*For it's our grief that gives us our gratitude,*

*Shows us how to find hope, if we ever lose it.*

*So ensure that this ache wasn't endured in vain:*

*Do not ignore the pain. Give it purpose. Use it...*

So what do we do in the midst of all these calamities?

What is the work, the labor we are called to do?

Writer Anne Lamott concludes:

*We're existentially exhausted by It All, and afraid of what is to come. So what now? Same old same old: breathe, pray if we pray, show up, listen, donate, give blood, stick*

*together, practice gratitude, radical self care, take care of the poor, pick up litter, and love like crazy.*

The lightning strikes will continue, the storms aren't over yet. But we are people, grounded in Christ, supported by each other, doing our best to love like crazy, ready to face the thunder of this age, looking forward to the dawning of the next.