



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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My Arm It Is Too Heavy

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The first time I heard a young woman complain in the ER that her arm was too heavy, I simply thought it must be a Spanish idiom that didn't translate well. But by the third or fourth time I heard this complaint, I knew it was more than a language issue.

I was a first-year medical resident in Texas, just starting to learn my trade. So, I asked one of the senior residents what should I do for a patient with an arm that was too heavy? "Send them to ortho," was the reply, so I gave these patients a phone number and instructed them to call the next day for an appointment in the ortho clinic.

But they came back to the ER – their arms were still too heavy. I sent them to neurology; I sent them to psychiatry; but they still returned to the ER. Their arms were still heavy.

And then suddenly I didn't hear this complaint. I had left San Antonio after completing my residency and started practicing in D.C. No one came in

because of a heavy arm. They came in with many other complaints, but no one seemed to have a heavy arm, at least until I started working in a community health clinic here in Alexandria.

And then they were back – young Hispanic women were coming to see me because their arms were too heavy. But at this clinic, there were few options to refer these cases to a specialist. There was no ortho clinic for them to call the next day. So, I had to figure it out myself.

I started asking more questions: where are you from? Honduras. Do you have children? Yes, five. Are they living here? No, they are living in Honduras with their grandmother. Do you miss them? A little, but we talk on the phone every Sunday morning. When did you last see them? Eight years ago. But doctor, my arm is too heavy. What can you do for my arm?

It was still about the heavy arm. But then I learned to ask one more question. Do you cry sometimes? Yes, sometimes. And then it all started coming out. Not just the tears of separation, but the desperation, the fear, the stories of the violence they had suffered on their six-week walk from Honduras to the border in Texas.

I got better at recognizing it, better at applying the “cry test” instead of trying to find a private orthopedist who would take one more charity case. But still, I couldn’t fix their arms. I couldn’t fix their hurt.

What is happening when an arm is too heavy? And what is actually happening when we are given permission to complain, to lament, when we are invited to cry out?

Psychologists explain this with their snappy little acronym: PTSD. Post-traumatic stress disorder: external stressors cause a buildup of internal stress. If there is no outlet for this stress, it results in physical or somatic complaints. Asking someone to verbalize that pain makes them feel better. All very neat and understandable, but is that all that is really going on?

We gather on Sundays to sing spirituals about “laying our burdens down” or recite Psalm 13 and ask,

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?”

How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?" (Psalm 13:1-2).

Why do we use these words? What is happening?

Well, we certainly feel better. Getting together once a week to sing, and pray, and hug each other certainly can lift a burden from us, if only temporarily. Who hasn't had the experience of walking out of church with the feeling of a cloud having been lifted?

And now that we have passed the one-year mark in the pandemic, we can no longer take for granted the value of these sessions, these opportunities to read together the Psalms of lament. Sure, it's "virtual" church, but it serves its purpose.

But still, we have to keep coming back, just like my patients who keep coming back. If it's not the arm that's too heavy, it's the leg that tingles, or that burning pain in the pit of the stomach, or that throbbing above the right eye. It's always something.

I suspect that few of us know what it's like to go eight years without seeing our children. Sure, we've just gone months without seeing them, but we knew, at least we hoped, that it wouldn't go on much longer, that we would soon be back to normal. No, it hasn't been easy for any of us, and it's been downright horrible for some.

So, we need to take care of ourselves. We can't let our burdens pile up. We need to gather, and sing, and lament, and pray. We need to exchange the sign of peace with each other and share our stories. We need each other and we need our Sunday mornings.

But by all means, let your doctor know if your arm feels too heavy. It might be something serious. It might mean you need to cry.

