Mental Health and Theologies of Suffering

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Mental Health and Theologies of Suffering
Theologies of suffering have been used by theologians, ministers, and faithful alike to try to understand why God allows innocent suffering. These ideas have been applied to wars, violence, starvation, grief, mental health challenges, and the list goes on. Theologies of suffering have also had significant impact on the perception of mental health and the experience of those enduring suffering. Intellectual approaches to theologies of suffering should be separate from pastoral approaches, though they have historically had an influence. While certain theological narratives are helpful for an individual to find meaning in their own pain, theologians must be careful of uninvited application of scholarship to another’s lived experience. Similarly, those who accompany a friend or loved one in their journey with mental illness should lead with compassion and support, not judgement or prescriptions. Theologies of suffering should not exist solely to extract meaning from suffering, but to seek the best course of action for encountering suffering in a productive way.

Suffering, to start, can be defined in many ways. Suffering for one person might mean the death of a loved one, while suffering for their neighbor might mean not having food to put on the table for their family. Because suffering comes in all shapes and sizes, it can be observed from many different angles. Some people focus solely on the painful symptoms, whether they manifest themselves in a physical or emotional sense. However, it is difficult to understand the full scope of someone’s suffering if the symptoms are all that are acknowledged. In her work, *Suffering*, Dorothee Sölle says that “the word suffering expresses first the duration and intensity of a pain and then the multi-dimensionality that roots the suffering in the physical and social sphere” (16). She includes the social consequences of intense suffering as a dimension of one’s experience of it. For example, if a person suddenly loses a loved one, their suffering not only affects their emotional wellbeing, but it also affects them socially. Their sadness may further remove them from social circles where they once felt at home, further ostracizing them from
support and perpetuating their pain. Acknowledging the isolation that accompanies the physical symptoms of a person’s afflictions allows for a much broader understanding of human suffering.

To make a further distinction, innocent suffering is characterized as suffering that has no rational cause. For example, if someone stubbed their toe and experienced pain because of it, the obvious explanation for their pain would be the fact that they smashed their foot against something. It’s not so easy, however, to determine why someone is afflicted with cancer, or why someone suffers from depression. This innocent suffering is a unique brand of pain, both physical and social, that manifests without a clear cause. Another dimension that is important to consider is the depth of the suffering. Someone stubbing their toe is a different type of suffering than someone breaking their leg. On this spectrum, there is brief and light suffering, and there is long and intense suffering. Where innocent and intense suffering converge is the focal point.

Theologians often view the concept of this innocent human suffering as an ethical question about God’s will in human lives. Because suffering itself, like the loss of a loved one, a traumatic experience, or the violent actions of another human being cannot themselves be deemed as good, theologians seek to answer where God (the pinnacle of goodness) lies within them. Some might see this as an affirmation of the hope that theologians have for the presence of God among the suffering, and God’s care for the oppressed. However, it often functions as an avenue for the placement of God in problematic locations as God relates to suffering.

Some theologians place God as the inflictor of suffering, like in the case of Jesus’ crucifixion. In their book, The Backside of the Cross, Diane Leclerc et al. write about how atonement theology asserts that “Jesus was a victim of God” (76). This association of Jesus’ death as a direct result of God’s will is problematic for the faith of those who suffering innocently, much like Jesus did. It suggests that God inflicts suffering upon those whom God
loves most, and only to serve a greater good than what we can imagine. It also promotes suffering as a blessing that should be endured like Jesus endured it. If Jesus’ suffering was necessary and His willingness to suffer holy because of its greater purpose, should other people’s suffering be endured as a blessing (Leclerc et al. 82)?

This sentiment could be due to the emphasis of the Christian faith on the suffering of Jesus. In their book *Saving Paradise*, Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker describe the shift that Christianity made from paradise-centric theology to suffering-centric theology. They write about how the early Christians were focused on stories of paradise, prosperity, God’s presence on earth, and hope for a “world of harmony amidst conflict” (Brock and Parker 18-19). This paradise-centric theology encouraged recognizing the love of God on earth in the present day, not as something to be met with only at the end of life (Brock and Parker 4). However, Christians began to make a shift towards a more suffering-centric theology as colonization and evangelization began to become a focus of their efforts. In their effort to convert pagans, Christians of the 8th century began to focus less on the presence of God on earth and more on the “dangers of hell after death” (Brock and Parker 225). They began to threaten pagans with the judgement of God if they didn’t convert to Christianity. They justified their violence as the price that God required them to pay for not following Christianity. Brock and Parker write that Christians “constructed a Christian piety that used violence to convert pagans and then taught its victims to regard their violation as justified and sanctified” (238). This dismissal of responsibility and justification of violence continued through history and is still present today in many forms.

The attitude of sanctified suffering is deeply rooted in Christian beliefs about Jesus’ crucifixion. As mentioned before, Christians have come to hold suffering as “a passing evil that serves a greater good” (Sölle 43). The crucifixion of Jesus is viewed as innocent suffering with a greater purpose. Christian atonement theology credits Jesus with the salvation of all of
humanity’s sins by His death on the cross. This theology has come to live in tandem with the belief that innocent human suffering should be endured in solidarity with Christ’s suffering. Sölle writes that “it is clear that Christianity makes an overwhelming affirmation of suffering, far stronger than many other world views that do not have as their center the symbol of the cross” (107). However, atonement theology can and should be separated from the innocent suffering of humanity. This connection is harmful because it celebrates the suffering of humans and in turn encourages fear and helplessness. If someone experiencing intense suffering is met with the sentiment that they should keep their head down and suffer in solidarity with Christ, they can begin to feel scared of God’s judgement if they don’t suffer faithfully. They can also begin to feel unworthy of support or care to ease their supposedly God-given symptoms (Coblentz 83).

Rather than leading with compassion, Christian theologies of suffering seek first to explain why an individual is experiencing innocent suffering (Sölle 155). Intellectually, this may be appropriate when applied to an abstract concept of suffering. Pastorally, this approach is ineffective. When a suffering individual is in the depths of their pain and needs someone to talk to, a theoretical approach questioning the will of God and the greater plan of their suffering does not help them in any way. Empathy and support are missing from this approach, as this theology of suffering bypasses the pain of the present moment and heads straight for a greater meaning that the sufferer isn’t ready for. This creates a disconnect between the minister and the sufferer, as a remedy for suffering (the needs of the sufferer) is bypassed in pursuit of an ultimate purpose.

When someone who is suffering tries to confide in a person of faith about their pain, they are often met with responses that are anything but helpful. Monica Coleman, a prominent theologian and scholar, wrote a book describing her journey with mental illness and faith, and she shares a similar experience. She approached a pastor to discuss her struggle with depression and writes that “she told me that I didn’t need a doctor; I needed Jesus...but no, this was not
about religion” (Coleman 277). Instead of listening to the pain of Monica and meeting her with support and understanding, this pastor advised her to pray about her depression, and to search for God’s hand in her anguish.

Pastoral care surrounding mental health has been a significant environment where theologies of suffering, like sanctified suffering, have been applied harmfully. For context, theologies of suffering will be examined as they apply to clinical and bipolar depression. There are many other mental illnesses that could be addressed differently by theologies of suffering. As was mentioned before, theologies of suffering aim to explain suffering, not remedy it. Among theological narratives surrounding mental health, a prominent approach is telling others how they ought to interpret their own suffering, which is often expressed as offering to make meaning of someone’s pain for them. This emerges in both intellectual and pastoral contexts, and two distinct beliefs underscore this approach; first, the view that depressive suffering is a result of sin, and second, that depression is divinely instructed. Both assumptions lead to unhealthy strategies for addressing and recovering from intense suffering.

If depressive suffering functions as a direct result of sin, this places the sufferer as the root cause of the pain they are experiencing. Describing the sufferer as the source of their own pain makes them “morally culpable” for their depression, and therefore creates an undertone of justification for a wrong that was committed (Coblentz 59). In her book *Dust in the Blood*, Jessica Coblentz writes that two of the possible sins often attributed to an experience of depression are a demonstration of lack of faith, or some sort of disordered relationship with God (57). By this reasoning, someone experiencing depression is making a “disobedient emotional choice” through which their depression is expressed (Coblentz 58).
If depressive suffering functions as divine instruction, the relationship between God and suffering/the sufferer is once again skewed. Popular theological beliefs surrounding suffering talk about it as “purification,” or “advancing personal holiness,” or, better yet, “part of a journey” (Coblentz 65). The general pastoral message here is to suffer faithfully, pray that God may use the pain to make someone even stronger, to trust that God has a plan, and to bear personal growth in virtue. All of these seem like great petitions to pray for, except that this approach still places the blame on the sufferer. It suggests that they must have done something wrong and are now being rightfully punished by God. Coleman talks about how her multiple encounters with pastoral ministers led her to ask herself, “Is this what they tell people? That it’s our fault? That taking blame onto ourselves or doing some kind of exorcism will heal us?” (181). Coleman, along with many other people experiencing depressive suffering, find it entirely unhelpful and experience no relief of their symptoms from trying to live a “good Christian life” (Coblentz 76). In the end, this Christian theology of depression leads to apathy and even blame towards the sufferer. This, mixed with the fear of judgement from God if one doesn’t suffer faithfully, makes for a very discouraging pastoral response and can have detrimental effects on the sufferer.

A theology of suffering as divine instruction and purification also discounts all who do not emerge from such intense depressive suffering (Coblentz 77). It does not leave room for the stories of those who lost their lives due to suicide. Victims of suicide are painted as sufferers who couldn’t stand the purification process, rather than fighters who lost their lives to a pain so great it couldn’t be overcome. It can only apply to those who eventually find meaning in their pain, and only then has the depression been suffered faithfully (Coblentz 77).

As I approach graduation and prepare to begin my studies as a Master of Divinity student, I have spent time contemplating what a pastoral approach to suffering looks like for me. Through
reading the experiences of Monica Coleman, Jessica Coblentz, and spending time sitting with the writing of Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker, I have built my own perception of what it means to be a lay minister to the people of the Catholic Church. Maybe our prominent theologies of suffering are focusing on the wrong part. Maybe God exists not in the plan God has for our suffering, but in the compassion we show each other as we share our suffering. We can bring the presence of God to one another by listening and being empathetic.

Theologians and ministers should stop trying to ascribe meaning to all suffering. Sölle advises that “one cannot make suffering productive for another,” and therefore the depressive suffering of another should not be met with theological questions of why they are experiencing it (167). Coblentz suggests that theologians and Christians alike ought to accompany with compassion and offer resources for consideration, not prescriptions (102). Allowing others to interpret their own suffering and accompanying them on that journey leads to a more compassionate relationship with our loved ones who are suffering. Coleman talks about how her connection with others who had similar struggles with mental health was vital to her understanding of the disease and learning how to cope with it. She said, “we need each other so that we won’t have to battle the dragon alone” (Coleman 316). The community she found among others suffering from depression was exactly what she needed.

All of this is not to say that finding meaning in one’s suffering is entirely discounted. Some people experiencing innocent suffering come to a point in their journey where they find it very helpful to rationalize and ascribe meaning to their pain. Many people are able to acknowledge the mystery of God’s accompaniment through their suffering and can find communion with God coexisting with pain. However, the distinction as theologians and Christians is not to insert ourselves into the pain of others and try to make sense of it for them. It is no one’s job to place blame on those suffering from depression, and it is no one’s job to force
those who are experiencing depression to form meaning out of it. Coblentz writes that “for those who take seriously the mystery of God in relation to suffering, they cannot presume to know better than the sufferer about what God is doing and what this suffering means before God” (94). It is up to the person experiencing the pain to find meaning, and it is up to those outside of the suffering to offer only support, a listening ear, and compassion.

Experiences of depression can often lead to searching for a religious explanation, which can be helpful for some or can be even more isolating (Coblentz 50). In the Gospel of Luke chapter 24, verses 13-35, two of Jesus’ disciples are walking on the road to Emmaus. They are experiencing deep suffering in the wake of Jesus’ crucifixion. They are confused, wondering what the implications of this suffering are for their faith, their community, and their lives. Suddenly, a stranger appears and begins to accompany them on their walk, listening to their pain, talking with them about it, and eventually sharing a meal with them. This stranger, who they later learn is Jesus Himself, offers these two disciples what they needed most — a listening ear and a companion. When we, as ministers, meet people on their own walks with suffering, let us bring a listening ear and accompany them. Let us be the presence of Jesus in anyone’s Road to Emmaus story.
Citations:


