

Bruton Parish Episcopal Church
The Third Sunday of Easter
The Rev'd Jan Brown, Deacon
May 5, 2019

I have long been fascinated by the concept of Moral injury and the accompanying ideas of moral stress and spiritual impasse that often lead to moral injury. Perhaps it is because I grew up with a father who was a career military officer, who never talked specifically about what he did in the military, or perhaps it is because in my years as a cadet at the United States Military Academy, I grew to understand that I wasn't cut out to be a military officer. Perhaps it is because I have watched my brother, also a career military officer, change from the person I knew growing up to a very different person, following his retirement from the United States Army.

I cannot say for sure when and where my interest in moral injury developed. I do know that for the past 10 or so years, I have been attempting to learn as much as I can about it, who it affects, how and why it happens, and what can be done about it.

This morning's readings led to further reflections on moral injury, expanding my understanding of who it affects beyond those of whom I was originally aware.

It allowed me the opportunity to take a deeper more ethical, spiritual and theological look into moral injury, expanding my understanding of who it affects, allowing me a further glimpse into its role in the lives of those I care about and into the lives of those to whom I minister.

It allowed me to grapple with it as it appears in Scripture, and recognize how Jesus managed it during his time with his disciples.

It occurred to me that in doing so, we as the Body of Christ might learn something new about forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation and further our ability to share the Good news of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ during this Easter Season with our families, friends, and those Jesus would call our neighbors.

By definition, "moral injury results when soldiers violate their core moral beliefs, and in evaluating their behavior negatively, they feel they no longer live in a reliable, meaningful world and can no longer be regarded as decent human beings. They may feel this even if what they did was warranted and unavoidable" (Brock, R. N.)

Moral injury has been most often associated with military personnel, however, its definition has been expanded because we know that in times of moral stress, even outside of war, people can act against their moral code.

I offer it to you again, with slightly different language. Moral injury results when caregivers, both professional and familial, physicians, nurses, teachers, chaplains, first responders, community organizers, disciples and others violate their core moral beliefs; and in evaluating their behavior negatively, they feel they no longer live in a reliable, meaningful world and can no longer be regarded as decent human beings. They may feel this even if what they did was warranted and unavoidable.

The Consequences of violating one's conscience . . . can be devastating. Responses include depression, overwhelming guilt and shame, doubt, fear, anxiety, and self-medication through substances or behaviors. Moral injury can lead to feelings of worthlessness, remorse, and despair; individuals may feel as if they lost their souls in "combat" and are no longer who they were (Shay Moral Injury Center).

For some, when faced with spiritual impasse, when their core beliefs confront their life experiences and their deeply held belief system is not adequate, they become shattered, and enter a "dark night of the soul". They experience isolation, guilt, regret, broken heartedness and failure. For them, connecting emotionally to others becomes impossible for those trapped inside the walls of such feelings. When the consequences become overwhelming, the only relief may seem to be to leave this life behind." Consider the example of Judas Iscariot - being plagued with guilt after betraying Jesus; he took his own life.

People such as Judas Iscariot feel they have lost their souls due to regrettable acts and wish they could wipe the act away, but their minds won't let them. People who have transgressed their moral beliefs and expectations, who have done their best in impossible situations, and despite doing so, believed that they have failed.

There are millions of people with similar feelings and beliefs living in the United States; I might suggest that some of us here are among them.

In our Gospel reading from John, Jesus appears to seven of his disciples after his resurrection, speaking particularly to Peter. Peter warms himself by the charcoal fire after a long night of fishing. Jesus questions him, saying, "Simon Son of John, do you love me"?

Twice Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you", though on the third time Peter appears hurt by the question and responds, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

After every question and answer, Jesus instructs Peter to "feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep".

Friends, I might call this scene Peter's do-over or Peter standing at the turning point. The last time Peter stood by a charcoal fire, (John 18) he failed miserably by denying he knew Jesus three separate times. Here, Jesus brings Peter back to a similar scene and puts him through another series of three questions. Imagine yourself in Peter's shoes, being again in a similar situation, standing next to the fire, warming yourself; being questioned by Jesus.

If it were me, I might be remembering how I got it wrong the last time and be feeling pretty badly about myself.

I might have some pretty awful regrets about what I had done, in Peter's case, what he had done while experiencing moral stress; standing at a spiritual impasse; perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, and acting upon things that transgressed his deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.

Anyone here relate to Peter? Anyone ever act upon, bear witness to, fail to prevent or perpetrate things that transgressed your deeply held moral beliefs and expectations? I know I have.

When we live against our own values, morals and beliefs we experience moral injury, we lose faith in ourselves, and we often lose faith in God.

Jesus gently confronts Peter with the moral injury of his past, his act of wrongdoing, his act of transgression that severely contradicted his expectation of what is right.

This time, however, Jesus walks Peter through his past and leads him into a brand new future. Yes, Peter has regrets; and yes, Peter's regrets have scarred his soul. Now Peter gets to do it differently, he gets to do the work of Jesus feeding and tending the sheep. Now, Peter gets to follow Jesus.

For those of us here this morning, whose lives have been affected by ailing family members, who have witnessed horrible atrocities and were helpless to make it different, who have lived with violence and trauma and had no means of escaping it, who had limited or no resources in times of great need, or who had other life experiences that caused us to transgress or contradict our morals and beliefs, we too get to have do overs.

As we stand at our turning point, during the dark night of our soul, we are faced with making one of three choices:

deny our experience and hold onto our beliefs,

accept our experience and abandon our belief,

or transform our established framework in light of our lived experience and experience renewed meaning and purpose in our lives.

Through the workings of God, through our faith, through confession, prayer and meditation, through experiencing consequences of our behavior, we, like Peter, are confronted with the moral injury of our past.

And, as Jesus did for Peter, God will do for us; walk us through our past and lead us gently into our future. God loves us and forgives us even after we have denied him, even after we have disbelieved and given up, even after we have sinned. If we have the faith to accept God's love and forgiveness, what happened to Peter can happen to us.

When we pray in the words our Savior Christ has taught us, or we humbly make our confession to Almighty God, or we draw near with faith and say together the Nicene Creed, the eyes of our faith are opened, and we behold God in all his redeeming work.

The moral injury of our past no longer controls our present. We follow the teachings of and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry on Christ's work.

And, we carry the message of hope and healing, of reconciliation and redemption, of forgiveness and recovery and of joy and love to all those whose paths we cross.

This, my Sisters and Brothers, is the general invitation to discipleship that Jesus offers to each of us: to outgrow the mistakes of our past, to follow Him, and to be a member of his flock.

Psalm 30 that we said or sang earlier captures our individual acceptance and thanksgiving beautifully: praise and thanks for deliverance and restoration; an invitation to others to join in; a flashback to the time before deliverance; and a return to praise and thanks.

I conclude with a portion of the Psalmist words.

I will exalt you, O Lord, because you have lifted me up and have not let my enemies triumph over me.

O Lord, I cried out to you, and you restored me to health.

You have brought me up, O Lord, from the dead; you restored my life as I was going down to the grave.

You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing; O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.

Resources on Moral Injury used for sermon preparation:

BPFNA Bautistas por la Paz. Moral Injury of War: What your Church can Do About..., retrieved online May 3, 2019 from https://www.bpfna.org/mobilize/sm_files/Moral_stress_monograph.pdf

Brock, R. N. Moral Conscience, Moral Injury, and Rituals for Recovery. Moral Injury and Beyond. Papadopolous, R. ed. New York. Routledge. Forthcoming 2017.

Shay Moral Injury Center (2019), Understanding the Struggle with Identity and Meaning, retrieved online May 3, 2019 from <https://www.voa.org/moral-injury-center>