

Message: “Personal Hurt”

Stephen Mansfield, a former pastor and New York Times best-selling author, has startling information about church hurt.

According to his research, “4 out of every 10 unchurched people in the United States avoid church life because of past bad experiences in church or in relation to church people. Whether the issue is the way they’ve been judged, or the lack of trust between a congregation and its leaders, or perceived hypocrisy in the way church members live, or outright incivility or meanness suffered at the hands of other church members, 25-30 million Americans stay away from Christian churches because of their past treatment.”¹

I believe this highlights the greatest paradox of our time.

The primary place for God’s love, grace and mercy to be shared and expressed can become the place people are most reluctant to go for help when they are hurting. Combined with two years of pandemic and its ongoing aftermath, and the political, social and economic divisions of our day, and, individually, we’re put in an impossible position. It's no wonder so many people feel isolated, hurt and alone.

What are we to do? Each of us decides what course we take in life. No one else can really tell us what to do. But before you log out or drift off, listening to the self-talk in your mind, I invite you to listen to this narrative. Stephen Mansfield was, at one time, the director of a dormitory at a large Midwestern university. Stephen was the one who got the call when someone needed help.

“One morning, he received an urgent message. Rushing to the site, Stephen found a scene of near madness. There was a dark-haired woman covering her face with her hands, wailing, ‘Oh, my God!’ over and over with increasing volume. There was a short, balding man who rushed up, and started jabbing his finger violently into Stephen’s chest promising punishment, ‘I’ll sue you, your mother, and this university for all you’re worth?’ Stephen never was sure how his mother entered the picture.

¹ Stephen Mansfield, *Healing Your Church Hurt*, Tyndale Publishers, 2010, p. x

Just beyond the two stood a university security guard, who looked at Stephen blankly, with an expression that said, ‘It’s all yours. Let’s see what you can do.’

And at the center of it all was Timmy. Well dressed, name-monogrammed-on-his-shirt Timmy. And Timmy was in trouble.

Stephen knew Timmy was in trouble because he was screaming as loudly as any child ever has. The source of his trouble seemed to be that his right arm was swallowed up by a candy machine. His arm was in the machine right up to the shoulder. Occasionally, he would try to pull his arm free in anger but couldn’t. There was some blood from where the edge of the machine had cut the skin on his arm. The dark-haired woman was obviously Timmy’s mother and the short, balding man was clearly Timmy’s father.

Stephen stood there for a minute with absolutely no idea what to do. But, after reviewing the situation, he decided his best chance was with Timmy. So Stephen walked over to Timmy and ran his hand up his arm to both assess the situation and offer comfort. And that’s when he noticed something odd. Timmy’s arm was taut, but in a way that suggested something else.

A sudden realization came to Stephen. He stepped back, waved everyone off and said, ‘Timmy, let go of the candy bar.’

Everyone when quiet, waiting to see what would happen. Timmy stopped crying and pulled his arm out of the machine.”²

Nothing can keep our soul in bondage except the unhealthy things we insist on holding tight. This is a powerful image. It highlights the change we must be willing to make for our personal situation to change, for our life to get better. It’s what the addict must decide, to start the steps to recovery. It reminds me that, when life has bled me dry or my friends have failed me or I’ve fouled my own nest through my own folly, better days lie ahead. But only if I’m willing to loosen my death grip on my offences, my bitterness, my need for revenge, my anger, my self-pity and, especially, my pride.

² *Op. cit, Mansfield, pp. 3-4*

What are you holding on to? By asking this question, I'm sadly aware it limits who will listen to this message. Some have walked away and won't return. Some don't trust and so will find it difficult to hear or see the path of grace. We've all been raised with images of God limited by our upbringing and experiences, good and bad. Some can't find grace because they only know a god-of-impossible-expectations or a god-who-doesn't-care or a god-who-allows-abuse. Those are false images. We've learned them from others, but they are not God.

We can be afraid to ask tough questions or to disagree with what we hear from a pastor or church leader or member. Sometimes, when we complain, we're told quit going to church and disconnect from spiritual practices. No doubt this works for some people, sadly.

But there are others who are drawn because of something they can't explain. Some of them are in this room, while others tune in online or perhaps listen at a distance. There's something speaking to them and drawing them closer.

Asking us to stop believing and practicing would be so unnatural it would cause a certain blindness. It'd be like demolishing a musician's piano, or breaking an artist's brushes, or denying an engineer's numbers, or protesting a teacher's style. It just doesn't make sense. So we find ourselves at a new place, a place between belief and unbelief.

I believe the hunger and thirst of our soul draws us to spiritual things. It may be when we finally admit there's a higher power. Or when we feel peace after talking to God. Or maybe when we're in a place where we feel a supernatural presence. We feel a sense of calm and humility. We can reach out and embrace hope.

When that happens, I think we're like the humble person in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:9-14). We don't know how to approach God, but we know we need God's mercy. We know we're wounded, but we can be healed. And, as counter cultural as it may seem, forgiveness is part of the answer. Being vulnerable in this way isn't opening ourselves up endless suffering. It's the way to life-giving healing, recovery and affirmation of our identity as God's child, loved and loving.

How to heal from our wound is another matter. “When we get a physical injury, we know what to do. We can clean the wound, making sure it doesn't get infected. We add ointments and bandages. We Google symptoms. We even travel to the doctor’s office to ease our worries and soothe our fears or for additional treatment.

Psychological wounds are more difficult to detect and heal. I used to think I was pretty self-aware until I got in over my head (pun intended). I needed someone who was more aware of family systems and trauma and how we process things to help me recover. I’ve learned a great deal by having someone walk with me, listening to my story and giving me the tools I needed to understand my life.

But that’s when I realized there’s another kind of healing needed. It’s tangled up with the physical and psychological, but it’s different. Because of the pain inflicted in a religious context, I needed a spiritual solution.

Where do we go when we suffer from the sort of contusions we hardly have the ability to identify? What do we do when our therapist doesn’t seem to have the right navigational tools to help us on a spiritual journey? How do we overcome our spiritual malaise?”³

Henri Nouwen said, “You’ve been wounded in many ways. The more you open yourself to being healed, the more you will discover how deep your wounds are The great challenge is living your wounds through instead of thinking them through. It’s better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds deeply than to understand them, better to let them enter into your silence than to talk about them.

The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your hurts to your head or to your heart. In your head you can analyze them, find their causes and consequences, and coin words to speak and write about them. But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds go down to your heart. Then you can live through them and discover they will not destroy you. Your heart is greater than your wounds.”⁴

³ Carol Merritt, *Healing Spiritual Wounds*, HarperOne, 2017, pp. 26-28

⁴ Henri Nouwen Society, *Daily Devotion*, October 9, 2022

This is the space where we are now. It's the space where we long for the love of God, even when we're taught of God's vengeance. It's discerning the goodness of our desires while being told of their corrupting abilities. It's longing for the world as it ought to be even as we're told to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. This is the place God yearns to meet us. And you are welcome here.

God loves you. I invite you to come and sit with us as we share our stories and encounter God's love once again. We're saving a space for you at the table.

Let us pray:

Lord, thank you for making us the way we are. Thank you for giving us bodies, minds and the freedom to choose. Thank you for our soul, the deep, mysterious part of us always reaching out, seeking a connection with you. Help us to embrace your love and grace. Help us let go of the unhealthy things we hold on to. Pardon and heal us by your grace. Teach us to trust you and love so our soul may be healthy. Unite our will, mind and body in our love for you, for each other and for those we do not yet know. In Jesus' name, we rest and pray. Amen.

Ephesians 4:31-32 (CEB)

Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

Luke 18:9-14 (CEB)

Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: "Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else - crooks, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, 'God, show mercy to me, a sinner.' I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."