Embracing Vulnerability to Overcome Pain
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Hi, I'm Katie Sciba, and this Advent we are addressing obstacles that a lot of us have to having a truly joyful Christmas. So first, we addressed busyness - that we have to-do lists miles and miles long, and we have things in our mind happening that we're just abuzz with. Everything is busy during Advent. Even outside of Advent, a lot of us are just crazy busy with our time, even with our minds. And we discovered that that the antidote to this busyness is inviting the Lord to calm our lives. We looked to Mary and discovered that, by her example, we need to achieve union with the Father through prayer in order to have peace, in order to peacefully do the things that God wants us to do.

The next thing that we addressed is self-comparison. It is so easy for us to look at other people and kind of measure up to them, and we could find ourselves superior - we think we're better than them - or we find ourselves lacking - we feel inferior to other people, because of whatever it is that they've been blessed with that we feel that we just are missing. We don't have that. And the antidote to that that we find in Mary, who was blessed with the greatest honor, the highest honor ever given to man, she was humble. She said "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord." So she acknowledged God as the giver of her gifts. And if she, who was blessed with the highest honor ever does that, then we should surely do that. If we are humble and acknowledge God as the giver, and we also acknowledge the blessings that we have with gratitude, then that will help us have peace during Christmastime.

This next thing that we have is particularly difficult. All of us are walking around with personal pain. I'm talking about deep personal wounds. Maybe something happened to you in childhood, maybe something is happening to you now. Whatever it is, we are all walking around fighting some sort of difficult battle. I love that line, you see it every now and then on social media. It says "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." And anytime I read that, I'm reminded that I need to be a little sweeter to people, a little more tender, because we are all dealing with stuff that can be very, very challenging to personally overcome.

So we have this pain, right. I was listening to a talk once and the speaker, a priest, invited all listeners to consider the hardest thing in your life. What is the hardest part of your life? And that is where our Lord wants to make you a saint. It is so often through our pain that the Lord achieves sainthood within us, for us, right. I remember when I heard that question, I thought of mine and I was like "No!" I remember thinking "Pick something else. I don't want that to be my path to

heaven. Pick something easier," right. Because I didn't want to deal with my own personal pain. And a lot of us, sometimes we don't tell everyone the deepest parts of ourselves, right, we don't just lay it out for all people to see and experience with us, and sometimes we have a tendency to shut even God out. So it's fine to have a trusted few, or maybe even no one knows about what troubles us so much. But it's when we treat God in that same way, and that is a roadblock to peace. When we do not entrust our pain to the Lord even if we're mad, even if we're angry with God for allowing some painful experience to happen. We shut Him out.

Now, I confess, it's a personal tendency of mine - when I'm mad at someone, I don't really want to talk to them. I kind of stonewall. So if I'm frustrated with the Lord, if I don't understand His plan, I stonewall. I leave Him out. Because I don't want to talk to Him, I don't want to talk about it, and I don't want to go there because it hurts so much. So sometimes, we have pain that's self-imposed, we do it to ourselves, and sometimes we experience pain from others. And when we stonewall God, we fall into this tendency of self-reliance, right. The "I'm going to handle things on my own, and I'll let You know, Lord, when I need You. I'll consult You when I'm really in a pickle." And when we're in this self-reliance, we're still seeking peace, but we look in all the wrong places, right. We develop coping mechanisms that might seem fine, or even funny on the surface, but point to genuine suffering.

So, so many of us have, like, retail therapy - we shop when we're stressed, we eat when we're stressed. People develop addictions, or they constantly seek the approval of others, maybe they even busy themselves just so they don't have to sit down, rest, and realize the pain that they're enduring, and that is a hard place to be. When we develop this sense of self-reliance, that we can handle it, we can heal ourselves or, better yet, we can just move on and forget it, then we shut the Lord out. We do not give the Lord the opportunity to heal us.

Now, I have deluded myself into self-reliance before, and it's then that I just neglect prayer until I'm out of my depth. And I can always tell when - just like in that verse that I mentioned before, ***From the overflow of the mouth, the heart speaks*** - I can always tell, and I'm sure others can as well, when I'm neglecting my prayer life, because I am just not as kind to others. Now, when we are hardened from our personal pain - which is so... it's so easy to become that way, because of whatever wounds we're carrying around - the antidote to this is vulnerability, which may seem a little counterintuitive, right. Because when we're in pain, we want an extra defense mechanism, we want a Band-Aid, something that protects us from everything else, and so we have those unhealthy coping mechanisms, right. But vulnerability with Jesus is the antidote to this kind of pain.

It was in 2013 that my dad became very, very, very sick. He had had cancer for a couple of years, and things were starting to look better, like he might actually overcome it, and then they just took a nosedive for the worst and his passing was imminent. I remember at that time begging the Lord for my dad's life, pleading with Him, just painfully asking Him to spare my dad. I was looking ahead to what life without my dad would be, and it was... it was terrifying.

My dad passed away in September of 2013, and initially I was fine. My faith really upheld me, and I felt even joyful after his passing, just as a sense of relief because he was not suffering anymore. And that did not last long. Sometime after, I became very angry. I was in shock that my dad died because, in my mind, he was invincible. But something took him down, and I was very... I was so upset, and I remember deciding that I was done with God, and I remember saying something to that effect, like "I have had enough of Your plan. I'm done." So I stonewalled God, and I stopped praying quite intentionally. I kept going to Mass, because we had a young family and I didn't want to set a bad example for my kids, but at the same time I just... I went with this very hardened, empty heart. I was so angry, because I begged the Lord and He said no.

Similarly, around the same time, my young marriage looked fine on the surface, but after you're married for a little while you build walls up and you stop letting each other in unless you're doing that with intention, unless you're letting each other in and having spiritual and emotional intimacy, and my husband and I were missing that big time. And over the years, our walls just became higher and higher until we really didn't know each other very well anymore. We had eventually become roommates. And so it was around this time that things... pain was building in my marriage, and my dad passed away and I was experiencing that pain, and I was so confused. Now, I am naturally a people-pleaser. I'm pretty accepting. I'm a people-pleaser sometimes to a fault. But I stopped accepting my circumstances, and I let the Lord know that I was really upset.

At one point, when I was stonewalling the Lord, my Bishop at the time, I told him about it and he said "Why don't you just tell Him? Why don't you just let Him know that you're mad? He can take it, He's big enough." And I remember thinking "Okay." You know, for a long time I thought the only emotion I could express to the Lord was joy or gratitude, but I never thought to tell Him that I was hurt, sad, and angry. And so at one point I was alone, and I thought "Now's the time," and I really let God have it. I really opened myself up, the raw version of myself, and all of the pain and anger that I felt I just let it out relentlessly. And in doing that - I didn't realize it at the time - but in doing that, I opened my heart to God. And that pain and anger melted into sorrow, and so I could tell Jesus how sad I was, and how much I missed my dad, how much... how little I knew what to do in my

marriage. And the Lord took my heart and guided me. And, in time, my husband and I healed, and I became joyfully accepting of my father's passing."

And what is the antidote that Mary exemplifies in that same situation? She was accepting and vulnerable. When she was uncertain and knew, like when the Archangel Gabriel said that she would conceive and bear a son, she said "I am the handmaid of the Lord," essentially saying "So be it." When they found a place for Jesus to be born and it was a really humble, dirty place, I love that in that Christmas narrative, at the very end, Luke writes "Mary pondered all these things in her heart." She pondered these things in her heart. When we are enduring pain and difficulty, if we take the time to consider what it is that the Lord is doing in us right now.

One of my favorite verses is Psalm 143, there's a line in that Psalm that says "I muse on what your hands have wrought." And that means that we look back on the lives that we've lived thus far and we see how the Lord has carried us through pain, how He has kept us surviving, how He has helped us maintain joy in a variety of circumstances. When we look back on how Jesus has sustained us, we can have hope for the future, knowing that even if we're enduring pain or wounds right now that He still carries us. Saint Faustina wrote in her diary "I see that when the Lord allows suffering, He upholds us with greater grace."

So whatever it is that God allows to happen in our lives, He also showers us with graces. But if we stonewall Him and we stop praying, if we stop trying to have union with our Father, then we shut ourselves out from those graces that are ready and available to us. And it doesn't mean that we have to come to the Lord with joy or even gratitude right off the bat. We don't have to say "Thank You God for this suffering." That kind of gratitude will come in time, but for the present we can say "God, I'm hurting. Help me. Sustain me. Show me how You're sustaining me." And the Lord will reveal Himself. He will answer that prayer directly.

And if you want to be able to hear God, if you want to be able to see how He answers your prayer, then you say "Lord, give me the grace to see how You're blessing me." So, sometimes it's not enough just to be like "Show me God," but then also saying "Give me the grace to keep my eyes open," because that is another obstacle. And when we submit our pain, when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable with Jesus in that way, when we offer Him the darkest, deepest pains that we have, then He will come in and offer His peace and His healing. We can have hope in those situations. Chesterton said "Hope is the power of being cheerful in circumstances that we know to be desperate." And hope during Advent can be so healing. We can be cheerful because we trust that the Lord will heal us, we trust that the Lord will offer a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light.

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