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Christ is found in sitting with those who suffer

April Gutierrez | Apr. 9, 2012 Young Voices

I was a junior in college when I went to El Salvador for the first time. The van moved slowly through San Salvador traffic, the window down, my mouth covered with my scarf to protect from the pollution, my lungs still burning. A slender boy no older than 10 came to my window with his hand out and gently grazed my hand with his fingers. The tiredness in his eyes, which were as brown as his leathery skin, could have belonged to an old man. When I looked at him, he put his arm on the windowpane and rested his head as we gazed into one another's eyes. I remember this moment so vividly as I sat staring into his eyes, completely humbled, realizing that his suffering was greater than my capacity to respond.
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I had decided to go to El Salvador because I wanted to make the world better, to fix something. But as I sat in the van with the desire to respond with whatever money I could offer, a voice asked me to just sit in this place, seeing him, and I knew I could only sit. And see him.

I was angry -- feeling cheated, really, to come to this place of knowing that I could not save the world. But there is a real grace in internalizing the words of Dan Clendenin [1], reflecting on Archbishop Oscar Romero: "We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."

Knowing that we are not messiahs gives focus to the responsibility and tasks given to us. We are called to do work that we might never personally see the results of when we are focused on the messiah. This relieves us to greater clarity in our own mission as followers.

Learning to sit with those who are suffering rather than trying to fix the problem is a difficult task. As an outsider, walking into a long-standing issue with a solution formulated in a weeklong trip can belittle the person or community native to the problem. Yet a ministry of presence, to truly offer to be present to someone, is incredibly challenging in a fast-paced society. Not to make it better, but to sit in the pain with someone. To allow space for the grief, the sadness -- this provides hope. Because if there is a world where someone will sit with the horrors of our humanness, there is comfort, there is Christ.

When I think about the greatest loss in my life, my cousin's death at only 19, I remember trying to stay very busy -- travel logistics, helping with funeral plans, buying a gift, anything to ensure that I was helping. I recognize the gift in these actions, but I am also aware of the avoidance and denial as my aunt reminded me that it would also be helpful to slow down and sit for a while. Or when I overheard another cousin saying, "Why can't April just be a cousin today instead of a minister?" I knew my "help" wasn't what was needed or what really honored my relationship with my cousin and our whole family. If there is a world where someone will sit in the horrors of our humanness, there is comfort, there is Christ.

Can I sit with Mother Mary at the foot of the cross of her son? Can I walk with my friends who are grieving, as others might have with Mary Magdalene? We give up meat on Fridays, coffee for all of Lent and create mini-deserts in our baptismal fonts in our attempt to touch desolation. We do these small things every year to remember the suffering of Jesus, who can offer an image for how to sit without fixing, as we cannot change the story we relive each year.

How does this connect with my sacrifice of my morning coffee [2]? Choosing a holistic approach to Lent rather than only a sacrifice allowed for greater depth. By diving into social injustice and reflecting on an image of powerful ritual, I uncovered a similar awareness that water is complex and an issue far greater than my personal consumption. I was quite surprised that four weeks in, I was still dearly missing my morning cup of joe. This daily sacrifice has transformed my relationship with water in both sacred and secular ways. Watching informative videos and having conversations on water issues has given me great insight into the many ways in which various companies are working to reduce their water usage or donate to wells for safe drinking water.

I am beginning to understand how the small sacrifices in my own life during Lent are moving me to respond -- and to sit. The suffering in the world can be made more tangible with daily sacrifices as reminders of the difficulty of changing a habit. In walking with those who are suffering, we get an experience of weeping with Mary Magdalene. If there is a world where someone will sit in the horrors of our humanness, there is comfort, there is Christ.

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