



‘No’ Can Be A Gracious Word

By ALLEN VERHEY, Ph.D.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” John 1:5

The class session had gone fairly well, I thought. The conversations concerning the moral issues involved in physician-assisted suicide had generated not only some controversy, but also some clarity. The distinction between killing and allowing to die had been defended. The problematic character of a mercy that kills, that is prepared to eliminate the sufferer in order to eliminate the suffering, had been noted. The folly of a social policy based simply on “maximizing freedom” or “increasing options” had been displayed. Yes, it had all gone fairly well.

Toward the end of class, I had cited John’s remark about the light that shines into the darkness, and I said something like this: “Suicide is contemplated in the darkness of despair. But the light shines into that darkness, too — and gives hope in the midst of despair.” Then I closed the class by quoting one of my favorite lines from author Peter DeVries, “Suicide is not a viable alternative.”¹

After the class, however, a conversation with a student prompted some further reflection. The student began politely, thanking me for a class period in which he had learned much, but he was a little troubled, he said, by my last few remarks. “The light has shined into the darkness,” he said, “but the darkness sometimes deepens. And when it does, suicide may seem a viable alternative.”

He wondered, in effect, whether my quoting John was not a little too facile a response to a person in a deep and deepening darkness, the sort of darkness that might prompt one to quit life. All I

could manage at that moment was to say, “Yes, the darkness sometimes deepens, but then we pray, ‘Lord, with me abide.’”

On my way back to my office, I worried a little that my last remark, too, could only have struck that student as too facile. And by the time I reached my office, I had decided that the class had not gone quite as well as I had thought. We had talked about physician-assisted suicide from the perspective of the Christian tradition, and from

In serious illness, for example, the darkness can deepen to despair when we lose hope for either recovery or for a life worth living while we are dying.



the perspective of social policy, and from the perspective of the medical profession, but not from the perspective of the one for whom the darkness has deepened, the one for whom suicide seems a viable alternative. And that perspective ought not to be ignored.

The student's remark did not prompt me to change my arguments against physician-assisted suicide, but it did prompt me to question the sufficiency of those arguments. It prompted me to wonder, moreover, whether what was missing in class that day, attention to the one for whom the darkness has deepened, is not also too often missing in Christian community.

Opposition to physician-assisted suicide in Christian community must include not only moral arguments, but also ministry. I, in class, and we, in Christian community, need to attend more carefully to the darkness, more carefully to the perspective of the agent who is lost in it, and more carefully to the church's ministry to those for whom the darkness deepens.

It is not enough simply to repeat the church's prohibition against suicide. It is not enough even to provide good arguments against physician-assisted suicide. Neither law nor good moral arguments may be sufficient to prevent one for whom the darkness is deepening from regarding suicide as a way out. The one in darkness needs not referral to a law, but a word of grace. But it is also not enough simply to announce that word of grace. The word of grace must be embodied; it must take on flesh.

However the darkness descends upon us, it can deepen into despair when we lose hope. In serious illness, for example, the darkness can deepen to despair when we lose hope for either recovery or for a life worth living while we are dying. Despair is marked by hopelessness, by the loss of a sense of possibility, its place taken by a sense of fatedness. There seems no hope of intervening against the inexorable march of events toward the fate that threatens us (whether death or a lingering dying). Such hopelessness can be killing sad.

The darkness can deepen into despair when we are unaccompanied in our affliction. Sometimes those of us who are well push the seriously ill to the margins of our community. We are not hospitable to reminders of our own vulnerability and contingency. We are autonomous, in control, in charge,

productive; they are not. We have been successful against the powerful threats of nature; they have not. "We stand elsewhere," as Auden says.²

Sometimes those of us who are sick withdraw, even from those who would be supportive. We may withdraw physically, going to our room, pulling the shades. But even in the presence of others, our affliction may render us mute, for we can find no meaning — and so, no words — to make sense of the affliction to ourselves or to communicate

[Psalm 88] challenges the facile assurance that the light shines in the darkness and that the darkness cannot put it out.

it to others.³ We cannot tell it, cannot communicate or "share" it. We can only withdraw. Despair is marked by that isolation from those we love and from those who would love us. Such loneliness can be killing sad.

The darkness can deepen into despair when we interpret the affliction as a sign that the powers that bear down on us do not sustain us, but work us harm. Then we suffer not only in the darkness but into the darkness, terrorized by our fatedness, angry about the untrustworthiness of our bodies, our communities, our gods. Such an interpretation, empty of faith in God, can be killing sad.

If such an account of despair suggests that hope and love and faith are its antidote, the question remains how hope and love and faith can be renewed in the deepening darkness. What might help the sufferer without minimizing the reality and pain?

Consider Psalm 88. Surely the one who authored this lament knew affliction. He had been sick, he said, from his youth up. And now the darkness had deepened to despair. The marks of despair are all there. Hope seems lost, replaced by a sense of fatedness. "Imprisoned, I cannot escape," he says.⁴ Now he lies there accompanied only by pain and death; his friends seem, to him, to shun him and his loved ones to despise him, "my one companion," he says, "is the darkness." And he interprets his affliction, finally, as a sign that God does not care.

There is, unlike most other laments in the Psalms, no final word of praise or assurance or



hope. This is a psalm that challenges the facile assurance that the light shines in the darkness and that the darkness cannot put it out. This is a cry from the edge of hell. The last word of Psalm 88, the last word for this psalmist, is “darkness.”⁵

But consider Psalm 88 again — now for the help it offers to one for whom the darkness deepens. Psalm 88 is a lament, the saddest of the laments to be sure, but still a lament, and lament is a form of prayer sanctioned by the community for the expression of the pain or suffering of the afflicted.

The community sanctions this form, and, remarkably, included this particular lament as part of its canon. The community did not reject this lament as insufficiently hopeful; it accepted and honored this lament as the voice of one who was still to be counted a member of the community. It did not ignore or marginalize or abandon the one for whom the darkness has deepened.

The communal authorization of lament gives the sufferer a voice, and the simple presence of others with ears to hear and the readiness to listen can help the sufferer to discover it, to move from mute suffering to its expression — and perhaps to some small steps from the edge of hell. The community’s commitment to hear the voice of the sufferer can, moreover, also train the community in compassion, in “suffering with” the sufferer.

The community’s faith in God, its trust in God and its loyalty to the cause of the God who delivers the oppressed and the imprisoned from their bondage and the afflicted from the darkness, governs its refusal to abandon the sufferer. That faith, the trust and loyalty of the community, prompt it not just to issue law — “the church prohibits suicide” — and make exhortation — “Don’t be so sad! Have a little faith, man!” — but to be attentive to the one in darkness. They do not interrupt the lament to make some facile announcement — “No, you’re wrong; darkness is not the last word!”

Such an announcement would be right, of course, but of little help. The help comes when the community is present to the sufferer, listens attentively, makes the lament its own, joining its voice to the lament while setting it in the context of the hope and love and faith of the community. The help comes in gracious deeds and words that do not merely announce the grace of God, but also perform it, embody it, give it flesh.

There are reasons to retrieve the ancient prac-

tice of lament, if the sufferer is to recover a voice and recall a connection to hope and love and faith, and if the community is to learn again to attend to the voice of those for whom the darkness deepens and to learn to help.⁶ But there also are reasons simply to underscore the significance of the community and of its other practices.

“The darkness sometimes deepens,” my student wisely said. My response that day was to say, “Yes, but we may still pray, ‘Lord, abide with me.’” The phrase was drawn, of course, from the same hymn to which the student may have alluded.⁷ It was not wrong exactly. (Lament is a form of prayer, after all.) But my response was too facile, and it was deeply flawed because, like the hymn, it focused too much on “me and God,” minimizing the significance of what the hymn calls “other helpers” in the lines, “When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.”

Other helpers do sometimes flee, but when they do, there is little help for one at the edge of hell. We need not minimize the grace of God or the work of the Spirit, but we should not minimize the significance of other helpers, either. Indeed, God’s grace and the Spirit’s work ordinarily encounter us in other helpers, rarely in individual revelations or in private theophanies.

Other helpers do sometimes flee, but when they do, there is little help for one at the edge of hell.

There are reasons to insist, therefore, that “other helpers” keep hope and love and faith with and for the afflicted, even when the darkness deepens into despair.

Other helpers offer simple, but hardly easy, words and deeds of love. They refuse to abandon the sufferer to the darkness; they recognize that keeping faith with the afflicted means keeping company with them. It means visiting the sick. The words and deeds of love are not prompted by pity, but by solidarity with and for the one for whom the darkness deepens, words and deeds marked by compassion.

The compassion may begin with simple presence, with the simple but painful task of keeping company with the afflicted. And indeed sometimes it must begin with silent presence, forgoing

the temptation to rush to speak in order to fill the painful silence of “mute suffering.”⁸

When the sufferer has been struck dumb by affliction, then such silent but attentive presence may provide a first and fundamental break with the desolating isolation of suffering. The readiness of another to care and to listen may nurture the readiness of the sufferer to seek care and to attempt to express the hurt. And in response to voiced suffering, compassion still listens attentively, but now also seeks words of its own. Those words may begin simply by joining compassionately in the lament, but they will also seek to join love to hope and faith. They struggle to identify (or to provide) some new possibilities in the midst of the affliction and in spite of the darkness.

The help and the hope are not voiced in some easy exhortation to “turn your scars into stars” or some other vacuous saw of “possibility thinking.” There may be, however, a real possibility of restoring health in some degree, or of some relief from pain. There may be a possibility of words and deeds worth doing in spite of the affliction, words of affection or forgiveness, deeds of friend-

Suicide attempts and suicide threats are sometimes confused ways to test the perception that no one really cares.

ship or reconciliation. Or there may at least be the possibility of some enjoyable moments with family or friends. Some of these possibilities can be identified by words of hope; perhaps some can be opened up by the deeds of other helpers. Such words and deeds may provide an initial remedy for the sense of fatedness that marks despair. And they may prepare the way for words and deeds of faith.

To keep faith with the sufferer is sometimes also to keep faith *for* the sufferer. Other helpers may recite the Apostles Creed in the presence of those for whom the darkness has deepened. It is still their creed, even if they cannot just now say with confidence, “I believe ... in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”

They may pray the Lord’s Prayer in the presence of those who suffer. It is still their prayer

when others invoke “Our Father” and pray for the coming kingdom and for a taste of it in such extraordinary things as forgiveness and such ordinary things as everyday bread and a good night’s rest. Such words and deeds of faith offer the resources of the tradition and the community to interpret the world and the powers that bear down on us in faith rather than in despair.

Did the psalmist in Psalm 88 find a path from the edge of hell to hope and love and faith? Did the darkness retreat before the light made manifest in the care of the community of hope and love and faith? We do not know, of course, and there is no guarantee that other helpers in the church will be able to rescue any from the bondage of a darkness that has deepened to despair. We are not the Messiah, after all.

The darkness of affliction can put faith in God to a severe test. Given the sort of world it is, other helpers and their words and deeds may not be enough to call a person from despair and suicide. Their bodies may be broken, or their spirits crushed; their circumstances may seem hopeless, and their dignity may seem lost. The tragedy of their lives and deaths should keep us from judging them (or ourselves) too quickly and too harshly.

The ambiguities of their circumstances do not eliminate, however, what remains the first obligation of other helpers: to prevent the suicide. And to prevent the suicide, the community properly preserves and reports the rule against it. Indeed, the rule itself can be a gracious word. Suicide attempts and suicide threats are sometimes calls for help, and sometimes confused ways to test the perception that no one really cares, that others would indeed prefer that they be dead and gone.

A response to a request for assistance in suicide that is governed by “maximizing freedom,” a response that says, “Well, it’s your choice after all,” provides no leverage against suicide and may well be interpreted as a sign that the perception is accurate, that no one does really care. The one for whom the darkness deepens needs, as I said above, a gracious word, not law. But let it now be said that the one for whom the darkness deepens needs a gracious word, not just “options.” To say “no” to suicide and to requests to assist in it is to signal that someone does care; to say “No!” can be a gracious word.



A faithful response to the gathering momentum for physician-assisted suicide will include the formulation of good moral arguments against it and the announcement of the Gospel in the face of it, but it also must include attention to those for whom the darkness has deepened and to the tasks of listening, caring and helping, giving witness to the light by gracious words and deeds of hope and love and faith.

ALLEN VERHEY is professor of Christian ethics at Duke Divinity School, Durham, N.C. Among his many published works is *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2011).

NOTES

1. Peter DeVries, *The Glory of the Hummingbird* (New York: Popular Library, 1976), 261.
2. W.H. Auden, "Sonnets from China," from *Collected Poems* by W. H. Auden (Random House, 1976).
3. See Warren Reich, "Speaking of Suffering: A Moral Account of Compassion," *Soundings* 72 (Spring, 1989), 83-108.
4. The translation used throughout for Psalm 88 is the translation by Joseph Gelineau, SJ.
5. Both in the Hebrew text and in the Gelineau translation.
6. There is, of course, much recent literature on lament. On the Biblical lament, see especially the collection of Walter Brueggemann's writings on the Psalms in Patrick D. Miller, ed., *The Psalms and the Life of Faith: Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). My own reflections on lament may be found in Allen Verhey, *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 114-140.
7. Henry F. Lyte, "Abide with Me":
*Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.*
8. Reich.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

www.chausa.org

HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, January-February 2014
Copyright © 2014 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States
