

## What are the Spiritual Implications for PTSD and TBI and How can Parish Nurses Help?

*by Pastor Jim Behringer*

I've read that the war isn't over for our veterans or their families when they are enduring PTSD and TBI. The repercussions of battle survival, especially in this era when many who once died of injuries are now surviving, is being borne by men and women long after their return to their families. The presentations we have seen today bring home to us that our fellow citizens who have experienced combat duty or other trauma do not easily shed the war from their minds once they return. Their families, too, are finding themselves in a situation they did not expect and are unprepared for.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injuries present new opportunities for God's family to serve Him as Spirit-driven, Christ-compelled compassion wells up in our hearts for those who find themselves still "in the war." Those among us who will encounter this suffering in a medical context want to understand it and how best to treat it. We pray for continued improvements in understanding this trauma and in medical treatments that relieve its victims.

But you have asked me to present the spiritual implications for PTSD and TBI. I am no expert in the nature of these complex problems – I learned more than I have ever known by reviewing Carlos and Linda's presentations in preparation for my presentation. Yet, as I watched and listened, I realized that my Christian ministry has encountered this question before.

How do you minister to anyone who is enduring a chronic problem or trauma? What spiritual help can you be to someone whose pain will not go away or who has a child who has rare and severe developmental disabilities? What does God want us to offer someone enduring the trauma of being molested as a child or the lifelong burden of schizophrenia? In all these cases, God's Word speaks much of the same counsel and encouragement to His people.

With that in mind, let me share with you some of what God has taught me as a pastor of people who suffer deeply.

### **For the men and women who suffer:**

**Redemption:** We will not see the hand of the true God if we do not start with redemption. "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" is the starting point for everything we have to offer anyone who is hurting. Redemption assumes a broken or empty way of life:

**1 Peter 1:18-19** -- For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that ***you were redeemed from the empty way of life*** handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

**Ephesians 2:3-5** – Like the rest, *we were by nature objects of wrath*. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved.

Redemption also is “repurposing.” We were destined to be destroyed, but God rescued us for His purpose. Notice that these passages follow the above statements about redemption:

**1 Peter 2:9-10** – But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that *you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

**Ephesians 2:7-10** – In order that in the coming ages *he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus*. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*.

At the heart of ministering to anyone with a long term trauma is the message of the grace of God in Christ. The sneaking suspicion that “I must have done something wrong” is met with the Lord’s forgiveness. The angry thought that “God has abandoned me” is answered by the cross. The feelings of uselessness, worthlessness, and despair find their healing in the redeeming love of Christ. Survivor guilt also is treated with the grace of God, who loves every man, woman and child. Our times are in His hands.

**Hope:** Hope is such a beautiful Christian word, yet it is misunderstood in the world’s dictionary. Hope is not a delusion achieved by wishing or positive thinking. For the Christian, hope is an expectation, the awareness and anticipation of what Christ has promised. Hope has always driven God’s people when the world believes that things are hopeless:

**2 Corinthians 4:16-18** – Therefore *we do not lose heart*. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For *our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

**Jeremiah 29:11** – “*For I know the plans I have for you,*” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

There is a thread that runs through passages on hope that we must not miss: God knows, but often we can’t see. One of the spiritual implications of trauma and chronic suffering is that we do not understand. We cannot see.

Although this section addresses the implications for those who suffer, I want to point out that everyone who cares for the suffering needs to appreciate this point, too. We dare not jump to easy conclusions about “why God allows this” or “what God has planned.” We do not see into the heart of God, and stories like the suffering of Job give us pause at offering glib explanations.

**Faith:** Thank God that saving faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit! No one would believe the saving Gospel without the Spirit's illumination. The message of Christ crucified takes on added significance for the suffering Christian: "Christ suffered for you." The suffering Christian first asks, "Why me? Why has God let me suffer?" and then learns that it is not punishment for sin, that Christ suffered that penalty, and that our heavenly Father loves us. Saving faith grows stronger, and looks forward to the "goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls." (1 Peter 1:9)

The terrible uncertainty caused by PTSD and the fears and frustrations that may grow out of severe TBI challenges us in a different area of faith. Besides faith in Christ's payment for our sins, the Christian learns to trust God in daily life. This "trusting faith" is different from saving faith. Saving faith accepts the facts about sin and salvation. Trusting faith is learning to draw strength, comfort and direction from the Lord. St. Paul describes what the Lord taught him when he struggled with his thorn in the flesh:

**2 Corinthians 12:9** – "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*"

Of course, trusting God may be a suffering Christian's greatest struggle. The Christian who has endured the trauma of rape sometimes is overwhelmed with feelings of betrayal by God: "I trusted Him. Now I feel He stood by and let it happen." I have found that the anger which David expresses in Psalm 13 is useful for spiritual healing in this area. After expressing his frustration at feeling forgotten by God, and wondering how long his suffering would continue, David expressed the paradox that many wounded Christians feel:

**Psalm 13:5** – *But I trust in your unfailing love;* my heart rejoices in your salvation.

When I speak with a suffering person who is angry with God, I remember David's words and I use them to show that it is okay to tell God about your anger and frustration with what has happened. Only a person determined to remain in a relationship with the Lord will want to do this; an unbeliever will simply conclude there is no God. Who better to tell about your anger than the Lord Himself? To do so doesn't negate the existence of trusting faith, as David demonstrates.

Spiritual struggles have something in common with physical injuries: they usually don't go away as soon as they're treated. The Holy Spirit takes time to heal a wounded heart. I wish I could do what a doctor does when he sets a broken bone: tell the patient how soon she will be fully recovered. I do know that the Spirit does restore trusting faith over time. It can't be hurried by telling someone, "You gotta trust God."

Trust grows as it is fed a steady diet of God's promises and observation of His faithfulness. Sometimes I have been told that it helps the sufferer to know that at least **I** trust God – it's a beginning of the path back to trust.

**Patience:** Patience has gotten a bad rap among Christians in our impatient society. "Don't pray for patience," everyone warns with a laugh, with the assumption that God will put you through a long period of waiting to get there. People have the impression that patience is something that you either have or you don't – or that God miraculously dumps patience on certain people.

Long term suffering exhausts all our good humor about waiting. It pushes us past the limits of impatience till finally we despair of a timetable that reveals when the end will be in sight. That despair is a good thing. God can work with a person who no longer looks at the clock.

It is at the end of the rope – when we have given up on expectations regarding the length of time – that we tend to learn the truth about patience: patience is goal-oriented. Patience is about outcomes, not about calendars and clocks.

**Ecclesiastes 7:8** – The *end of a matter is better than its beginning*, and patience is better than pride.

**Hebrews 6:12** – We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who *through faith and patience inherit what has been promised*.

It's not by accident that the Bible connects patience with perseverance.

**James 5:10-11** – Brothers, as an example of *patience* in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, *we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about*.

Once a suffering person focuses on the outcome instead of how long the suffering has gone on, patience begins to grow. My advice to someone who is consumed with impatience is:

- 1) Realize that God wants something to come out of this before He takes it away
- 2) Fill those times when you feel impatient for the problem to go away. Persevere with therapy. Learn. Research what can be done. Pray about God's will for you. Read God's Word.

**How can parish nurses help the men and women who suffer?** It is not the scope of my presentation to speak of medical or psychological intervention, but to speak of the spiritual ways of helping.

Parish nurses, of course, know that it will be a great help to a suffering person to bring the pastor in for long term spiritual care. This can be a great blessing, if the pastor has some understanding of PTSD and TBI so that he can anticipate how to meet the spiritual needs of someone who is suffering trauma. Parish nurses are used to clearing the way for pastoral ministry.

Parish nurses will know – possibly better than anyone except the family of the sufferer – what issues require prayer for those who suffer. Parish nurses have a lot of prayers to offer!

But as Esther's uncle reminded her, how do you know that God has not put YOU here for just such a time as this? There will be opportunities for parish nurses to listen and thoughtfully respond to the comments of someone who suffers long time. Whether it is reminding the parishioner of Christ's redemption and grace, or providing hope, testifying to faith, or teaching about patience, a parish nurse's personal witness can be the voice of Jesus. While you are not called to be the sufferer's pastor, you are always ready to share the reason for the hope that

you have. Sometimes the time is just right; the sufferer has asked you what you think and wants to hear your answer. Let your conversation be **“full of grace, seasoned with salt.”**

It helps the patient to hear how you view your redemption and your life of faith. We think of witnessing to unbelievers, but the Bible urges us to **encourage one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”** Recently a member of my Bible class stated that when I had shared my story with her it gave her hope that God would also forgive her. My story had not been one of those “here’s where I am a good example of a righteous life” stories, but a story about my struggle with sin and how the Lord had kept me from being lost.

As a parish nurse, you are in a natural setting to share your convictions about why there is hope, why we can trust God, how God blesses us as we patiently persevere. So many people aren’t “there” for a suffering person, but your involvement and concern will open the ears of the suffering person to absorb your encouragement, even if it doesn’t seem so at the time.

#### **For the families of those who suffer:**

The families of those who suffer can be the forgotten victims of PTSD and TBI. Everyone is focused on helping the injured veteran, but the spouse and children suffer greatly. Parents of the person who suffers may also feel shut out and helpless. They can benefit from their own application of what was said earlier about redemption, hope, faith, and patience.

**Personality change.** Long term suffering has other spiritual implications for the sufferer’s family. In the area of PTSD and TBI, there can be personality changes that are disconcerting and a loss of the personality that once defined their loved one. Who is this person? Few people understand what it is like to love someone, to still see their face and be able to speak to them, but to have a stranger’s thinking be evident in words and actions. If the personality changes are sudden and unpredictable, this can be even more confusing.

Adapting to this new circumstance will involve some of the familiar “stages of grief” that all adapting requires. Whether it’s anger, bargaining, or depression, before we get to acceptance the Lord’s faithful love is the healing agent. He loves us as we are, not as others think we should be. He understands the nature of personality change (even the altering caused by original sin) and stands by us. The family of someone with a personality change will confront this mystery of grace. It’s an insight that not only applies to BTI or PTSD, but family members going through developmental changes, aging, dementia and mental illness. As we reflect on God’s love for our changed loved one, we see His steadfast love is always with us.

**Family needs family.** Even aside from the specific burdens of PTSD and TBI, families are affected by the long term effects of helping a loved one who has gone through trauma or whose suffering appears to be a permanent state. Energy that was once distributed as needed to every member of the family now seems drained by the suffering loved one. How can a teenage daughter struggling with her broken heart after a break up at high school expect much sympathy when she clearly is not suffering like her dad? How can a spouse complain about

loneliness when his marriage partner is still alive and with him – and what is loneliness compared to brain trauma?

God created the family because it was not good for a person to be alone. The Bible praises the goodness of God by saying, **“A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families.”** (Psalm 68:5-6) The first spiritual implication for the family of those who suffer is the need for the family to help and love each other as well as the injured or traumatized person. Much is written in the Bible about the roles of parents and children, siblings and spouses – God established the family for mutual support and encouragement.

The danger in this area is that Satan will turn heroic love and caretaking into a wedge that can divide a family. The needs of the suffering person can bring out heroic commitment and care, usually on the part of a parent or spouse. We admire the person who is “always there” for the suffering family member. But our admiration can be a trap. Who is “always there” for that caretaker? Who tends to the needs of the other family members? Trauma can often lead to a family crumbling under the pressures of the suffering person’s needs and the neglect of the rest of the family.

It can be hard for the heroic caretaker to delegate and involve others in helping. What about the teenager who doesn’t want to be around dad? What about the parents whose ideas of care are different from the spouse’s? It seems simpler just to do things yourself than increase the stress level by involving others.

Yet God created the family for mutual support and encouragement. Teenagers learn by being told to do things they don’t want to do. In-laws work out the tensions of different ways of doing things but strive to be of some help. Involving others usually doesn’t increase the stress, it changes the stress from a one-person-does-all to a team learning to work together and care for each other’s needs. (Of course, there are exceptions – family members who are unable to be involved or hostile and therefore not involved.)

**Strength from the Lord.** Of course the strength of every Christian, and of the Christian family is the Lord. One of the spiritual implications for the family under the stresses of PTSD and TBI is that those who never knew how to draw strength from the Lord will need to have it modeled and explained. When life is easy, we can be guilty of praising God with our mouths but having our hearts far from Him. But under stress we either learn what it is to find our strength in the Lord, or we turn away from the Lord.

I believe that our strength is found first of all in forgiveness of sins and the grace of God.

**Romans 8:31** – What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?

**1 John 1:8-9** – If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Living in grace provides security when all around is challenging our faith. Could this be the reason that hymns like “Just as I Am” and “Amazing Grace” are so beloved? Living in grace helps family members who feel ashamed of their sinful nature’s resentment of the burdens or their inability to do all that needs to be done for their loved ones.

Our certainty of grace flows from the gospel in Word and Sacrament. Strength in the Lord is not a matter of personal willpower – it grows in us as we drink in the pure spiritual milk of God’s Word and fall into our Lord’s embrace in His Holy Supper. In every age, Christians have renewed their strength like the eagle’s by returning repeatedly to God’s promises:

**Ephesians 6:10, 14-18** – Finally, ***be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.*** . . . Stand firm then, with ***the belt of truth*** buckled around your waist, with the ***breastplate of righteousness*** in place, and with your feet fitted with ***the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.*** In addition to all this, take up ***the shield of faith,*** with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take ***the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*** And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

“And pray.” Those words always take me back to an often misunderstood incident in Christ’s ministry. His disciples had been unable to cast out a demon. They ask Jesus why. He replies that such demons come out with prayer and fasting. A thousand books on exorcism find their basis in those words of Jesus, but when I read those words I was blown away by a single fact: the disciples hadn’t prayed. They went up against the devil and didn’t ask for help!

My strength is not in myself, but in the Lord who made heaven and earth. Families of those who suffer need to be encouraged to take every care to the Lord:

**Psalm 50:15** – ***Call upon me*** in the day of trouble; ***I will deliver you,*** and you will honor me.

**1 Peter 5:7** – Cast all your anxiety on him because ***he cares for you.***

**James 1:5** – If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ***ask God, who gives generously*** to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

### **How can parish nurses help the families of those who suffer?**

Of course a parish nurse is an educator and encourager of the family and will help families seek the resources available to them. The spiritual help we described earlier (connecting with the pastor, personal prayer, and your personal witness about the hope we have) all apply here.

A parish nurse often knew the sufferer before and after the injury, unlike the rest of the medical establishment. You can bring gospel comfort to the family as they go through the stages of grief. You can be alert to the family stresses and cast suggestions for sharing the load in spiritual terms rather than merely clinical. You know that God provides the family for the good of all members and can encourage individual members to share the task.

Share how you draw your strength from the Lord. When family members see how it works for you and recall what the Bible says, they will be encouraged to stay close to the Lord!

### **For the congregation of those who suffer:**

What are the spiritual implications for the congregation of the Christian with PTSD or TBI? Some congregation members would be startled to hear the suggestion that there are any spiritual implications. Isn't this a medical problem? Doesn't the military provide benefits to cover the needs of the veteran and his family?

You can almost hear Cain's complaint, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Only I don't think that most of our fellow congregation members have a heart like Cain's. The fact is that they aren't aware that there are spiritual implications for a congregation when one of the members returns from military service with PTSD or TBI.

**Responsibility:** The Christian congregation is not only committed to the Lord; we are committed to each other as brothers. A high school football star may swear you would never get him to go to a ballet, but when his daughter is a dancer, you will see him learning all about ballet slippers and famous ballets. What family would spend the money for a wheel chair? Answer: any family whose loved one needs it! The Bible has special responsibilities for a Christian family (congregation):

**1 Peter 3:8** – Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.

**Romans 12:10,13,15** – Be devoted *to one another in brotherly love*. . . *Share with God's people who are in need* . . . Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

**Galatians 6:10** – Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, *especially to those who belong to the family of believers*.

**1 John 3:16-17** – This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to *lay down our lives for our brothers*. If anyone has material possessions and sees *his brother in need but has no pity on him*, how can the love of God be in him?

**Vocation:** This term is regaining its rightful place among Lutherans. When Luther reformed the church, he realized that God has called some to be milk maids and others preachers. (This is not a strictly Lutheran observation: William Tyndale said, "If we look externally there is a difference betwixt the washing of dishes and preaching of the Word of God; but as touching to please God, in relation to His call, none at all.") Vocation refers to our "calling," not just the call to the Christian ministry but the calling every Christian has to serve the Lord. How do we determine our calling? We look to the situations in which God has placed us. We may have callings to be parents, siblings, community, as well as our profession.

**Colossians 3:23** – *Whatever you do*, work at it with all your heart, *as working for the Lord*, not for men.

**Ephesians 2:10** – We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance *for us to do*.

**Body of Christ:** The Bible teaches us that the church functions best when everyone uses the gifts God has given them. The church is strong on using the gifts of teaching and preaching and the modern American church makes heavy use of those with gifts of administration. But what about those whose gift is serving? Unless the task is defined as a church project, those whose gift is serving find themselves limited to serving at potlucks or helping fold bulletins. There's nothing wrong with those tasks, but when the needs of a veteran with PTSD or TBI overwhelm the family, God has provided more resources within the church family.

**1 Corinthians 12:7,24-26** – Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is *given for the common good*. . . God has combined the members of the body . . . so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. *If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.*

Many a Christian has found that a vocation experienced by helping a fellow church member is a mutual blessing and doesn't feel like an obligation, but quickly becomes a deep joy.

### **How can parish nurses help the congregation serve those who suffer?**

A parish nurse sometimes sees the needs that the congregation and its pastor do not see. You can work with the family to come up with tasks that could be done to help.

It is a service to God's people to help them see where they can serve Christ and their fellow believer. If you approach the pastor with these needs and ask for some names of people who might be able and willing to help, you might not only ask about people with the gifts to serve, but also someone who might recruit and coordinate the effort.

As always, pray. Ask God to make this a great blessing for both those who are served and for the whole congregation.

I deliberately chose to focus on spiritual help in this presentation. Parish nurses can, of course, bring their expertise and training for other kinds of help, and I wouldn't want to leave the impression that the only help is spiritual. I'd like to hear your thoughts on other ways that parish nurses would be involved in the care of WELS members with PTSD and TBI.