

## Rotheiser: Facing our tough hours

Discernment isn't an easy thing. Take this dilemma: When we find ourselves in a situation that's causing us deep interior anguish, do we walk away, assuming that the presence of such pain is an indication that this isn't the right place for us, that something's terminally wrong here? Or, like Jesus, do we accept to stay, saying to ourselves, our loved ones, and our God: "What shall I say, save me from this hour?"

At the very moment that Jesus was facing a humiliating death by crucifixion, the Gospel of John hints that he was offered an opportunity to escape.

A delegation of Greeks, through the apostle Philip, offer Jesus an invitation to leave with them, to go to a group that would receive him and his message. So Jesus has a choice: Endure anguish, humiliation, and death inside his own community or abandon that community for one that will accept him.

What does he do? He asks himself this question: "What shall I say, save me from this hour?"

Although this is phrased as a question, it's an answer. He is choosing to stay, to face the anguish, humiliation, and pain because he sees it as the precise fidelity he is called to within the very dynamic of the love he is preaching.

He came to earth to incarnate and teach what real love is and now, when the cost of that is humiliation and interior anguish, he knows and accepts that this is what's now being asked of him. The pain is not telling him that he's doing something wrong, is at the wrong place, or that this community is not worth this suffering. To the contrary: The pain is understood to be calling him to a deeper fidelity at the very heart of his mission and vocation.

Until this moment, only words were asked of him, now he is being asked to back them up in reality; he needs to swallow hard to do it.

*What shall I say, save me from this hour?* Do we have the wisdom and the generosity to say those words when, inside our own commitments, we are challenged to endure searing interior anguish?

When Jesus asks himself this question, what he is facing is a near-perfect mirror for situations we will all find ourselves in sometimes. In most every commitment we make, if we are faithful, an hour will come when we are suffering interior anguish (and often times exterior misunderstanding as well) and are faced with a tough decision:

- Is this pain and misunderstanding (and even my own immaturity as I stand inside it) an indication that I'm in the wrong place, should leave, and find someone or some other community that wants me?

- Or, inside this interior anguish, exterior misunderstanding, and personal immaturity, am I called to say: *What shall I say, save me from this hour? This is what I'm called to! I was born for this!*

I think the question is critical because often anguishing pain can shake our commitments and tempt us to walk away from them. Marriages, consecrated religious vocations, commitments to work for justice, commitments to our church communities, and commitments to family and friends, can be abandoned on the belief that nobody is called to live inside such anguish, desolation, and misunderstanding.

Indeed, today the presence of pain, desolation, and misunderstanding is generally taken as a sign to abandon a commitment and find someone else or some other group that will affirm us rather than as an indication that now, just now, in this hour, inside this particular pain and misunderstanding, we have a chance to bring a life-giving grace into this commitment.

I have seen people leave marriages, leave family, leave priesthood, leave religious life, leave their church community, leave long-cherished friendships, and leave commitments to work for justice and peace because, at a point, they experienced a lot of pain and misunderstanding. And, in many of those cases, I also saw that it was in fact a good thing. The situation they were in was not life-giving for them or for others. They needed to be saved from that "hour". In some cases though the opposite was true. They were in excruciating pain, but that pain was an invitation to a deeper, more life-giving place inside their commitment. They left, just when they should have stayed.

Granted, discernment is difficult. It's not always for lack of generosity that people walk away from a commitment. Some of the most generous and unselfish people I know have left a marriage or the priesthood or religious life or their churches.

But I write this because, today, so much trusted psychological and spiritual literature does not sufficiently highlight the challenge to, like Jesus, stand inside excruciating pain and humiliating misunderstanding and instead of walking away to someone or some group that offers us the acceptance and understanding we crave, we instead accept that it is more life-giving to say: *What shall I say, save me from this hour?*