

“The Pearls of Life: A Drop in God’s Sea”
Psalm 8

Last week I read a column in the paper by Rabbi Marc Gellman. Gellman usually responds to questions from people about life and faith. Here is the question he was asked:

“Q: I don't understand how people can talk about a ‘loving God’ and all the other positive descriptions that are given. When I was born, it was with multiple birth defects, which have led to me being ridiculed, laughed at and all the not-so-nice things humans do and say to each other. I have been told repeatedly by my church friends who have invited me to their churches, ‘God loves you.’ Really? What kind of father (your word, not mine) does this to his child? I have suffered physically and emotionally for the things my ‘father’ gave me. I am told to be ‘thankful’ for what I have. Thankful is not what I feel nor will I ever. I have never gone to their churches as I feel this would be hypocritical. What is your answer to someone like me? — From L”

How do you think the Rabbi responded? How would you respond? Responding to human suffering is one of the hardest things about sharing our faith with others. Here is how the Rabbi responded:

“A: I am so sorry for your pain and I write not to convince you of anything, but only to tell you that I am sorry you feel that your burdens have far exceeded your blessings. I could have tried to explain away what you feel in an attempt to save the belief in a loving God, but I believe that this loving God whom you cannot yet love is more than capable of surviving your rage and patiently waiting for you to find God. Let me tell you how I have handled my own birth defect. I was born with a sunken chest....When I was an early adolescent I had an operation that was both primitive and only partially successful. It left me with a large scar on my chest. I was, like you, ridiculed by other boys who saw it. I was so embarrassed by my scar that I showered separately after gym class Now I have reached a place in my life and my faith where I can actually thank God for my scar. I understand that whatever compassion I have for others who are broken or ridiculed or abused comes from knowing how they feel. I know that my scar may seem like a minor burden - easily hidden and not grave in any way, but it was very grave to me. I faced the choice you face now. I could have used my scar to justify my anger against God or fate or the world or everyone. I chose instead to understand my scar not as a gift (that is too positive), but as an opportunity. My scar was an opportunity to hang onto the goodness of my life and to give thanks for the good that my scar had enabled me to do with my life. I am not alone, and you need not be alone in choosing to surmount your challenges. Helen Keller wrote of her blindness: ‘I thank God for my handicaps for, through them, I have found myself, my work and my God.’ My friend Hank Viscardi who helped enact the Americans with Disabilities Act and was severely handicapped was seemingly always happy. I asked him how he did it and he said to me, ‘You know, Marc, nobody is really disabled. It's just that some people are temporarily abled.’ We often grow more in spiritual depth as the result of our burdens than we do from our blessings. People with scars are more interesting than people without

them... Your anger is understandable, but your anger is also a choice. Whoever told you that the only possible proof of God's loving nature would be for God to give you a body, a life and a soul without defects of any kind? God never promised anyone a perfect life. God's promise is that God will accompany us through our imperfections. That is the ultimate promise of a loving parent, and that is the ultimate promise of a loving God. You must know the famous story of another angry person who blames God. He dreams of seeing two sets of footprints on a beach, but then, after his trauma, only one set of footprints. He cries out to God, 'When I needed you most you abandoned me!' God replies, "When you needed me most, I was carrying you." I pray that you might try — just try — to let God carry you for a while. Then, at the end of the beach, you can get down and walk on your own — grateful for your blessings, thankful for your scars and ready to be loved."

A powerful response that I thought could help us as we ponder the I Pearl and what it means to be human in relationship to God. I hope that we look at life with God not as a journey to perfection but instead as a way to wholeness. Our lives may seem so insignificant or so messed up that we may wonder if they even have any real lasting impact on the world. Part of the problem for us is that we associate perfection with God and with what the good life should look like. Psalm 8 invites us today to remember that we are created in the image of God and that nothing can take that away from us. Even though we may feel small in comparison to the majesty and glory of God, we are a part of it. We are a drop in God's ocean. There is no sin, hardship, struggle, corruption, or hate that could really separate us from the love of God. (Read Psalm 8) The Psalm asks an important question of faith, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" The answer to this eternal question is that we are surrounded by God's love. We are never to understand ourselves apart from God and God's creation. If we are truly to understand who we are and why we are here on earth, all we have to do is to look around us and see ourselves as part of God's marvelous work of love and creativity. This of course does not mean that we live a life of bliss with no challenges or problems. In fact, it is the opposite. It is because of our connection to God that we are able to get through the struggles of life and come out stronger on the other side. The key to this is to remember to live a life of praise and connection to the source of our being, the creator and giver of our lives.

(First Service) As we ponder the white I Pearl in the Pearls of Life, I would like to invite us to watch a short video about the formation of a pearl. I think that it can be a great metaphor for how we are shaped and formed.

The formation of a pearl

<https://youtu.be/m07OvPEoR6g>

(Second Service) In *Pearls of Wisdom*, Rachel Naomi Remen uses the process of the formation of a pearl to describe how we become our true selves, the selves that truly embrace our connection to God and to life. She writes, "An oyster is soft, tender, and vulnerable. Without the sanctuary of its shell it could not survive. But oysters must open their shells in order to 'breathe' water. Sometimes while an oyster is breathing, a grain

of sand will enter its shell and become a part of its life from then on. Such grains of sand cause pain, but an oyster does not alter its soft nature because of this. It does not become hard and leathery in order not to feel. It continues to entrust itself to the ocean, to open and breathe in order to live. But it does respond. Slowly and patiently, the oyster wraps the grain of sand in thin translucent layers until, over time, it has created something of great value in the place where it was most vulnerable to its pain. A pearl might be thought of as an oyster's response to its suffering. Not every oyster can do this. Oysters that do are far more valuable to people than oysters that do not. Sand is a way of life for an oyster. If you are soft and tender and must live on the sandy floor of the ocean, making pearls becomes a necessity if you are to live well. Disappointment and loss are a part of every life. Many times we can put such things behind us and get on with the rest of our lives. But not everything is amenable to this approach. Some things are too big or too deep to do this, and we will have to leave important parts of ourselves behind if we treat them in this way. These are the places where wisdom begins to grow in us. It begins with suffering that we do not avoid or rationalize or put behind us. It starts with the realization that our loss, whatever it is, has become a part of us and has altered our lives so profoundly that we cannot go back to the way it was before."

We will end with an excerpt from *The Pearls of Life* book. "We cannot totally let go of ourselves, but we can understand our lives as something greater than ourselves. This pearl urges us to open up our innermost room. To remember that we are created in God's image. The I pearl is placed next to the God pearl [separated by silence] to remind us that humans were created in the image of God. Like a grain of sand holds the promise of a pearl, each and every human being holds great potential. What stops us from being what we want to be? Some people are more confident than others; others too often get stuck in negative thoughts. The I pearl is about our true selves, about who we are beyond roles, demands and expectations. It is about seeing ourselves from God's perspective, as loved and treasured children. Hold the I Pearl and imagine your inner self. The most beautiful version of yourself ever imagined. I am loveable. I am longed for. I am loved. I am a drop in God's sea that reflects the sky. Prayer: I am a drop in God's ocean that reflects the sky." Amen