

COPING IN AN UNSAFE WORLD

The world is not safe. We already know that. We are vulnerable to everything from car accidents, home invasions and fraud to human trafficking and war. Every day we face problems that we or others created.

Some years ago I was consulting with a psychiatrist who was a colleague at the VA hospital. I made some comment about a patient who tended to use denial to avoid facing whatever he didn't want to face. "Jerry" replied, "We all live in a state of denial. If we didn't, we wouldn't get out of bed in the morning."

Jerry was right. Nobody gets out of bed thinking that a tree might fall onto the house where he or she lives. Nor do we wake up thinking "This might be the day that I get a diagnosis of an untreatable disease." Even less likely are we to awaken wondering whether a terrorist will set off a nuclear weapon in our city.

Still, there are unforeseen problems in almost everyone's life. Even our strongest denial cannot make them disappear. Rabbi Harold Kushner reminded us of this in his best-selling book, [When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#).

How do we cope? How do we endure? How do we not become embittered by our negative experiences? Beware of any "experts" who offer solutions that are easy and quick. That includes clergy who claim to have the answer to all of your problems. With clergy, find out if they have credentials and supervised experience that recognizes their skills to offer their services (i.e. pastoral counseling, spiritual direction, healing of memories, etc.).

Also, don't be misled by well-intentioned folks who say, "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade!" No one stops to think that when life hands us lemons, we might not have enough sugar to make the taste bearable.

God does not send lemons. Nor, however, is God always able to relieve our suffering when we ask. What God does offer us is the experience of being loved beyond any love we have ever known or imagined was possible. This love is what we lean on when it seems like we have lost faith and all else seems lost as well. Trusting God's love enables us to hope and to have faith.

It's fair to ask me, "How you know this?" I know this, in part, because I was brought to church as a child. It was there that I heard of God's incredible demonstration of love in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. I continue to experience God's love in at least three ways.

First, I have so many people who helped me when I really needed help that I wrote a book to thank them as well as to acknowledge God working through them. Second, I have been privileged to experience God's presence with me and with various congregations during worship and especially during Holy Communion. Third, and by no means least, I have been and continue to be forgiven much—by God and by specific people.

If we are going to cope with an unsafe world, we need to do it together. Living a Christian life apart from the church community is extraordinarily difficult. Doing it as part of the church means that we have a group who will be present for us in prayer, in the midst of our suffering and in love no matter how difficult our lives are. Together we share and express God's love for all people.

In an unsafe world we also need God's grace to forgive those who hurt us or fail to help us when it's clear that we need help. This includes forgiving our enemies and anyone who frightens us. The world is made safer when we ask for and accept forgiveness for our mistakes, insensitivities and, yes, our sins as well. We are even called to forgive people who don't ask for our forgiveness.

Coping in an unsafe world is never easy. However, we're far better able to cope if we are together as the Church. We need to know that God will work through each of us to help each one in need. Accepting this is an act of faith, but then God makes every act of faith possible.