

TAKE IT FROM HERE

SACRED SEASONS OF SORROW

Gigi Townsend Mooi

Take it from here
to those suffering around us—
those who can be so
easily marginalized in the Church.

By Denise Wynn

SO OFTEN, WE TEND TO SHY AWAY FROM THOSE WHOSE SUFFERING IS MORE THAN MOMENTARY. OR, WORSE YET, OFFER PLATITUDES TO TRAUMATIZED AND BROKEN SPIRITS WHEN THE REAL ANSWER IS SO SIMPLE.

Gigi Townsend Mooi, a 2009 MDiv graduate of Denver Seminary, contends that there isn't enough room for sorrow in the modern church. There is, however, great value in suffering and the Lord has been teaching it to Gigi for years.

Early on in seminary, Gigi had everything going for her. She had a scholarship, was the student body president, and an activist shaping her community. Then, as a result of personal losses, she experienced a period of deep pain. "I walked through the greatest crisis of my life while at Denver Seminary," said Gigi, "and the way Drs. Craig Blomberg, Danny Carroll, and Doug Groothuis supported, listened, counseled, and prayed with me helped create the community I needed." In a state of total weakness, Gigi experienced the Lord's great power through intimacy with Scripture and the communicated love of His servants.

During that time, Groothuis preached a sermon on the biblical practice of lamenting, one that she'll never forget. Vividly, Gigi recounted the lesson learned: "It seems if you are deeply hurting, deeply sorrowful, then the unspoken understanding in the Church is that something is wrong with you—because if you have Jesus, then you should have joy all the time, right?"

But, then I think, 'I'm pretty sure Jesus wept!'" So there *is* a biblical precedent of great men and women weeping and wailing out of the depth of their faith, and not the lack of it.

Having that community of professors, coupled with a biblical perspective of suffering, prepared her for ministry beyond seminary—a ministry of suffering that she couldn't yet imagine.

IN THEIR EYES

"Growing up in the inner city of Oakland, California as a half-Brazilian, half-Amish (white)

girl, conversations among people of color always included me. I viewed life, and its issues, through the lens of a person of color. Then, in 2009, I moved to South Africa and I lost that part of my identity overnight. "In the eyes of those in South Africa, I am white and had moved to the largest all-black residential area in a country still hemorrhaging from its long legacy of racial distrust, hatred, and anger."

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Gigi said, with pain in her voice, that this change in her perceived identity meant that she "was now identified in the same category as those who had violently oppressed the very community in which [she] was living and serving."

"The fact that I married a black South African man also made us one of the very few interracial couples in this country. We instantly became a threat to the very

fabric of a society built on racial hierarchy and separation, even post-Apartheid. Wherever we went, we felt the piercing stares of the masses."

WAVES OF SUFFERING

Suspicion, distrust, anger, and cruelty were reoccurring arrows targeted at Gigi from every direction. She and her husband had to move five times in two and a half years because of tensions with neighbors or violence visited against them in all forms—from being held at gunpoint by seven police officers for no reason to Gigi's cat being killed in the front yard.

The suffering didn't end with the emotional abuse of her environment; Gigi's health began to suffer dramatically. Everything from an untreated and serious case of pneumonia to a rare tropical blood disease ravaged her body. Emotionally and physically she was nearly worn out.

In all of this, she had one sweet and faithful friend who stood by her despite how wildly unpopular that was in their community. They were like sisters and this friend made up the sum total of Gigi's community outside of her loving husband. That is why, when this friend died suddenly by accidental drowning, it came as an epic blow. It is a wave of loss that Gigi is still riding.

But blow after blow, she presses on. All the previous trials have, in some way, prepared her to endure the long and emotional nature of her work.

AN IRREPRESSIBLE VISION

She and her husband, Sihle, are living out a vision to bring the unadulterated gospel to Soweto, South Africa—the largest all-black township created in the Apartheid era. Sihle planted the Soweto Community Church just months before meeting Gigi in 2008. To this day, it remains one of the few Bible preaching churches they are aware of among the five million-person community of Soweto. Together, they pastor in this community, showing the love of Jesus, and miracles have come from it.

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One of their primary ministries is working with the countless abandoned and orphaned babies of South Africa. They work with five orphanages in the area around Soweto, Johannesburg, and Pretoria and are in the beginning stages of starting their own.

Their work connected them to one particular orphanage located in north Pretoria. This community was known for being home to many of the wealthiest white Afrikaners and many former military officers. The white workers at the orphanage allowed Gigi and Sihle to come and volunteer and eventually they learned to trust, respect, and admire the couple for the work they do. Sihle extended an invitation to the Afrikaners to host a baby dedication ceremony at their church in Soweto and they agreed to attend.



Because the Afrikaners were anxious about coming into Soweto, they brought sixteen adults along with the twelve babies. Four of the sixteen were former military officers and one of the four was a woman. It was this woman who realized, upon driving up to the church, that its location was almost exactly where one of the bloodiest battles in Soweto happened during the Apartheid era nearly twenty years before; an event she was actively involved in.

During the service, this woman began to weep. Not long after her tears fell, the woman got up and asked for the microphone. Through choking sobs, she said, "I'm so sorry for what we have done to your community. I repent. I am so sorry, please forgive us."

By the end of the service all four military officers were in tears, along with the entire church congregation. Sihle took this opportunity to respond clearly and publicly to the Afrikaner military officers. He invited four of the core Sowetan men in the church to the front, then he said, "We want to show you tangibly how much we love, accept, and consider you part of our family in Christ. Please come forward because we just want to hug you." One by one, each of the former military officers received hugs from the Sowetan men; and the brokenness, forgiveness, and reconciliation flowed freely down their faces in tears.

Occasions like this don't just happen, but they will more and more. The Lord has a vision for the future of South Africa and that baby dedication service was just one piece of His great plan.

A LESSON LEARNED, AGAIN AND AGAIN

"More than that," Gigi quotes Paul, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value

of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.”¹

All this. All the suffering and sorrow that she and her family have endured is valuable. There needs to be a place for it in the Church that doesn't engender suspicion regarding one's faithfulness; rather it needs compassion, patience, and community.

“It seems that some fruit comes only from suffering. And, I saw that suffering is the inextricable base-color thread woven through the fabric of the gospel. It is the canvas upon which salvation has been painted.”

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The waves of suffering have helped Gigi know her Savior all the more. He was a man of sorrows. He was acquainted with grief. He was numbered among the transgressors,² just as she has been since coming to South Africa. Through her experience at Denver Seminary, and now in South Africa, she has learned that community is a healing balm for sorrow and that ultimate community is found in Christ.

Gigi Townsend Mooi

MASTER OF DIVINITY

Gigi and her husband pastor Soweto Community Church in the largest township in South Africa. She works with orphans and abandoned babies as a major part of the ministry. She is in the process of starting her own orphanage.



¹Holy Bible, Phil. 3:8, NASB

²Holy Bible, Isa. 53:3-12, NASB