

The Call Of Suffering

September 9, 2018

We begin our reflections upon the call of suffering. It was a couple weeks ago while on the way to O'Hare airport, listening to John O'Donahue's thoughts upon the call of suffering, it occurred to me that a number of parishioners were in the grip of grievous and painful circumstances, diagnoses, and times of real suffering and that we as a parish community were being called to bear with them this season of difficulty and grief.

In spite of our realization of great suffering in this world, and even possessing a sense of empathy and compassion for the countless unknown peoples who suffer on a daily basis, none of us wish or want that suffering upon ourselves or upon those whom we love. And so, when it comes, it is rarely received well.

We consider times of great suffering as misfortune, curse, punishment, or consequence. There must be a reason for this suffering. Christians often suppose the lack of God's favor and protection, especially if those who are suffering are NOT Christian. If we are in the right faith or tradition, then there must be a reason why God is allowing or sending the suffering, after all, the scriptures are filled with plagues, illness, death, and misfortune as a result of not trusting or obeying God.

One of the oldest stories that is part of the Old Testament is the Book of Job. This is a story that creates the kind of cosmic drama we can imagine in our own lives when the tides of well-being and happiness turn to tragedy. Job goes from being a person of wealth and loving family to losing everything and one dear to him, and it all happens for the sake of a test. This story is dated before 500 B.C. and yet, it feels like it could be written yesterday.

Job is not the only person in scripture who experiences horrible suffering. From the very beginning, not one generation from the paradise of Eden, Adam and Eve suffer the death of a son, Abel suffers the violence of Cain, Cain suffers the alienation of being banished. The whole world in the days of Noah suffers a great flood. Abraham and Sarah suffer infertility, Esau suffers the betrayal and trickery of Jacob, Joseph suffers being beaten and sold as a slave by his brothers. The whole nation of Israel suffers enslavement in Egypt. The mother of Moses suffers separation from her infant son. Moses suffers banishment from Egypt. Samson suffers the betrayal of Delilah. The prophets of Israel suffer death at the hands of occupying tribes as well as Israel's own rulers. The list goes on and on with the final crescendo of suffering being told by the Christian Gospel where Jesus, the healer, the teacher, the compassionate and holy one, suffers the shame and agony of Roman crucifixion. In his footsteps, every one of his disciples suffered numerous beatings, imprisonments, banishment, and ultimate death in the hands of violence.

All this suffering, all this pain, this alienation, this pain-filled cruel and unjust treatment fills not only the pages of the bible but of all human history. Which strongly suggests to

me, that though in our time of suffering we often feel alone and defeated, we are in the company of Jesus and a multitude of greats whose lives were called to bear great suffering in their lifetime. It seems to me, suffering is not the bane of the human story but an essential ingredient to the human story. The call to suffer, is integral to the call to be alive.

My childhood was a happy, peaceful, and secure, an Irish Catholic family of eight. I was the youngest of six children, and I did not know suffering until... the first day of summer vacation following 7th grade. I was home alone with my mother and father when suddenly I stood helplessly as my father began to physically assault my mother. When my father, in his rage, ripped the phone off of the kitchen wall and hurled at me to stop my screaming, my mother escaped from the corner and ran outside. Later that night, my father had a laugh with the police, apologizing for a domestic disturbance that got out of hand. That incident initiated a decade of suffering, violence, and instability in my home.

Throughout my life, I have known extended periods of peace and health and happiness, and I have known long periods of sadness, grief, instability, and suffering. In hindsight, it was the seasons of suffering that have made me profoundly, and authentically, human: fragile, vulnerable, broken, yet an instrument of divine grace and love.

If Jesus is the image of divine humanity or human divinity, then the call to suffer is unavoidable. Redemption and transformation from one degree of living to a deeper degree of living is only entered through the fires of suffering. It is during the dark seasons of suffering that the false images we have created for ourselves and for others fall away. Life becomes less innocent and we become less naïve and we are required to journey to deeper places of peace and goodness and belonging because the places we once depended upon no longer exist. We are required to connect to streams of grace and mercy and faith and hope and compassion for which we never needed before the call to suffer was heard in our own lives.

Over the past few months I have seen a season of suffering emerge upon beloved members of our parish. News being born that has rocked lives to the very core. It tempts me to wonder why? But there is no why. There is only where will this season take us. Who will we become as we bear with one another a season of grave and difficult matters? What will we discover amidst ourselves, and within ourselves, as the wild fires of suffering burn upon the surface of our parish community? What depths will we descend being pulled down by grief and despair? When bottoms are reached, will we find new realities and transformed identities?

Suffering is not a curse, a judgement, a consequence, or the devil. Suffering is a call, a season that comes to every life, some more than others, but when it comes it comes to change us, to challenge us, to create in us the kind of depth and belonging that only comes when one accepts the call to suffer.

For Suffering
Poem by John O'Donohue

May you be blessed in the holy names of those
Who, without you knowing it,
Help to carry and lighten your pain.

May you know serenity
When you are called
To enter the house of suffering.

May a window of light always surprise you.

May you be granted the wisdom
To avoid false resistance;
When suffering knocks on the door of your life,
May you glimpse its eventual gifts.

May you be able to receive the fruits of suffering.

May memory bless and protect you
With the hard-earned light of past travail;
To remind you that you have survived before
And though th darkness now is deep,
You will soon see the approaching light.

May the grace of time heal your wounds.

May you know that though the storm might rage,
Not a hair of your head will be harmed.

Amen