

The Call To Suffering II

September 16, 2018

We continue our happy reflection upon the call to suffering. I reminded the Tuesday Eucharist gathering that my inspiration for this series did not come from the appointed readings from the lectionary, but from the recognition that heavy news and grief was being carried by multiple parishioners, and I sensed we, as a parish family, were called to bear this time of suffering together. There are times when I am moved to be directed by a topic, rather than the themes of appointed scriptures, and it is a common practice and license for a priest to do so. So often, though, I find the scriptures bearing witness to the topic I have chosen.

This morning, is one of those occasions. Peter rebukes Jesus for accepting his call to suffer, and Jesus responds strongly. I find it worth noting. We are more inclined to find the devil in suffering. Hard and grief-filled times come, and we are prone to believe some evil or righteous judgment has befallen us. But, in this morning's gospel, Jesus does not see a devil in his suffering, but in the avoidance or rebuking of the suffering.

Consider that for a moment. From where does this idea come that suffering is always evil? I think it is because of the place that suffering brings us. It brings us to the kind of place we imagine as a kind of hell, the place of captivity where we have lost all power over our lives, physically and emotionally. Hear the cry of the psalmist, "*The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol, the Hebrew underworld, laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish*". Suffering brings isolation, the kind of place where we are a prisoner to our feelings and circumstance, and those we love and who love us, are inexplicably estranged from us. They cannot rescue us from the outside.

Annie and I mark our 29th anniversary together today. We were married September 16, 1989, one month following her mother's diagnosis of serious illness. Our first year of marriage is indelibly remembered with grievous and compassionate sharing of suffering and illness. It was also a time where I observed my own ineptitude and inability to relieve or prevent any of it. That's what real suffering does. It brings us to a place where no one else can be with us. Remember in the gospel story, all the disciples wished to be with Jesus in his hour of great suffering, but as he told them, they could not follow him in his time, but to accept the calling to suffering in their own time.

I believe that is what Jesus meant when he taught his disciples, you can't carry another person's cross, the best you can do is not deny your own cross when it falls upon you. The metaphor of the cross is not the life of Jesus, or the work of Jesus, as it is often understood. The cross was the suffering of Jesus, and as he told his disciples, if we walk the path he walked, we will have our own cross to bear. Do not deny it, do not hate it, do not judge it, do not pass it upon others to carry for you. Pick up your suffering and let it do what suffering does.

If you read the Psalms, you will find they run the full gamut of pathos between lament and ecstasy, humility and vengeance, suffering and jubilation, righteousness and shame. There is no human emotion or condition absent from the book of Psalms, which tells me that all manner of being is welcomed and redeemed amidst the omnipresence of divine love and healing. Suffering brings us to a place of God that no other condition can bring us. At first, it seems like hell, but as Psalm 139 reveals, *“even there, amidst the shackles of Sheol, your Spirit is with me”*. This is where suffering brings us, to a place we do not choose to go, but a place we find ourselves... alone, broken, sapped of all strength, empty, rejected, despised, abandoned, betrayed, tortured, stricken, dead. Nobody chooses those places, and only suffering can bring us to those places.

In his lectures, John O’ Donahue points out, *“If any of us can avoid the place of suffering then it is not suffering.”* But if any of us are in the place of great suffering, then there is no avoiding the hellish places we must journey. So where is the redemption to suffering? The testimony of both sacred and human story is: redemption is in the depths of humanity discovered and the life that emerges from the places of suffering. Jesus was not divine until he returned from the place of great suffering. We are not the same person coming out of suffering, or in the midst of suffering, than we were before we suffered. We, like Peter, can only imagine our destruction and defeat with suffering, we cannot imagine the grace, presence, peace, and compassion in the midst of suffering. The most remarkable and beautiful scene from the gospel account of the crucifixion of Jesus, is the absolution he utters with his final breath, *“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”*

When we accept the calling of suffering in our own life, when we receive it as our own cross to bear, whether it comes from our own foolishness, whether it comes from another person’s hatred, or whether it comes from no fault of anyone, it simply comes with pain and grief to bear. There is panic and fear life will never be the same. And you are right, for that is what suffering does, it changes us in a way that only suffering can do.

There is a beauty and a presence in persons that have known and befriended suffering, persons who have not let their suffering define them, but who have allowed it to transform them. A person acquainted with grief, but also aware of divine grace. There is stability and strength in a person who has been driven to the place of isolation and, in that place, finds an intimate solitude with God. Being left with nothing, a person can discover everything. Being stripped of fortune and well-being, a person can put on the clothes of Christ: peace, patience, compassion, gratitude, appreciation for all that was taken for granted until the call of suffering opened our eyes and expanded our hearts.

By accepting the call of suffering a person may very well lose the life they have always and only known, but it is also true that in losing that life we have always known, we may find a life we could only discover through the dark valley of great suffering.

Amen