

“Christ’s Suffering”

Isaiah 53:1-6; Romans 5:1-5;  
Philippians 3:7-16; Matthew 16:21-27

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I will say that as I came to this particular topic, it was one that I struggled with. I think I rewrote the sermon three or four times this week in trying to figure out what to say or how to approach the topic of Christ’s suffering. Last night I was listening to a song by Kate Wolf that has great meaning for me. It’s a folk song titled “Give Yourself to Love.” There’s a line in it that says, “You must give yourself to love if love is what you’re after. Open up your hearts to the tears and laughter.”

I think oftentimes I really want to invite us to recognize that in love there is laughter. I’m a little less likely to want to say that in love there are tears. There are both. Today’s sermon is really about the tears. It’s about the suffering that comes along with the life we live, the gift of life.

I’m one who can understand Peter pretty well when he goes to Jesus and says, “This must never be. This kind of suffering is not something that God should go through, endure, be part of.” Yet to that thinking, Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan.”

When I say the word “suffering” what image comes to your mind? One of the iconic images of the Great Depression is a Dorothy Lange picture titled *Migrant Mother*. It reminds me of the suffering the migrant workers of the 1930s went through in that particular time. But we can think of suffering in a lot of different places, in a lot of different ways. Life circumstances, illness, physical pain, chronic pain. The description that felt like it encompasses a lot is *the misery of affliction*, without defining what that affliction is. It feels like that begins to get at what suffering is about.

In our scriptures today, there are two predominant words that were used. One, *thlipsis*, has the meaning of *capacity and experience of feeling strong emotion*. Any time we feel really deep and hard and strong emotions, there is a sense of suffering to it. Perhaps that is what that word gets at. It is talking about Jesus’ suffering as the capacity and experience of deep, strong feelings. Jesus is describing going through his passion that way.

Romans, when it’s talking about suffering with Christ, talks about the idea that suffering is something that constricts or hems us in. Pressure and weight are the two words that came to my mind about that. We are weighed down. We’re feeling the pressure of life, and when we’re feeling that there is a sense of suffering that goes with it. So putting those two together, suffering is feeling deeply the weight and/or pressure of an experience or circumstance shaped by pain, dashed hope, fear of the future, grief, affliction, etc.

What comes to mind at this point is: why are we talking about suffering? Partly because it’s part of life and we will experience and respond to it in some way. Part of the question is: how do we respond? I thought that the story of Taylor in the Children’s Sermon this morning as the different characters came and said, “You should respond

this way,” or “You should respond that way,” was wonderful because it reminded us that we do respond in all those different kinds of ways. We might try to deny what’s happening. We might try to use anger to overcome it. We might think that in a moment we can get it all out and be done with it. We might blame others for it. There are so many responses we can have to suffering, both of others and our own. And we might even blame God for it.

As we hear Jesus talk about going through his suffering, as we hear Paul talk about suffering with Christ, we don’t hear an explanation for why it is. I’m tempted to try to give an explanation that love brings it, but overall, I just wish God had made a world without suffering. That doesn’t seem to be the case. Instead, it’s almost the opposite. Instead of God saying, “I’ll get rid of the suffering,” God says, “Pay attention to it. Live through it. Recognize it is part of life.” It’s not just laughter. It is the tears, too.

Jesus prays the same thing in the garden. “I don’t want this.” But he goes through it. In watching him and following him, he invites us to know that we will go through it as well. As Jesus invites us to stay with him through his suffering, he’s reminding us that God is doing the same thing with us. He’s reminding us that God has come to be with us in our lives, and not just in the laughter, but in the tears as well. He is with us through our hopes and our fears, and in fact, God comes to address why we sometimes create so much of that sad side, the suffering side, the tears.

Sometimes when I think about suffering, I want to say it must be that suffering must have a purpose and if I can just find the purpose then I can be okay with it. But I don’t always feel like I can find that purpose. Yet, as Jesus goes into his own suffering, we recognize that out of it blooms something wonderful—forgiveness, grace, an understanding of love that we might not have had before. In that piece from Isaiah about the suffering servant, somehow God is recognizing that as God takes on our hurt, our pain, the misery of affliction, there is a way he absorbs it or takes it from us and invites us into new life.

While I don’t understand why we go through suffering and I don’t always see why particular suffering happens, I do recognize that God comes in our suffering and brings out of it new life. In fact, there’s some way in which suffering is the way to righteousness. It’s a way to a right relationship with God and with one another. Maybe it goes back to that idea of tears and laughter. When we love one another, when we love our lives, whatever we love, when there is pain and struggle there is suffering and there are tears.

As we recognize that there is a reality to the suffering that we experience and that we’re really not just supposed to write it off, but that it is part of loving and living in our world, it feels like Christ gives us one more challenge about that. It’s not so much that we should try to avoid it, or deny it, or blame others for it, or in some way try to get through life without it. He seems to invite us, instead, to go where the suffering is, to recognize that the love of God has done just that. Through God’s love for us, God enters into the very misery and affliction of human life to the point of dying on the cross. I’ve never really liked that next step where he invites us to pick up our own cross and follow him. He’s inviting us not to run away from suffering, not to try to deny it, not to try

to minimize it, but somehow walk through it—not only on our own but with each other. It feels that he's not only talking about us as individuals, but us as people as well, to look and see the misery of affliction around us, perhaps in our own life, perhaps in someone else's life, perhaps in a group of people's lives. He invites us not to blame somebody for their own misery, but to somehow figure out how we enter that misery to share the suffering that leads to endurance, character, and hope.

This is the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deaths of five Jesuit priests and their housekeepers who were living in El Salvador. It was a time of crisis in the 1980s in El Salvador. They were caring for the least of the people in that place. They were speaking up for the poor who were disenfranchised. They were trying to bring justice where they saw injustice. And they were all killed one morning. Here we have a group of people living out their belief that they should love where there was suffering, and they gave their lives for it. It did, I think, bring international attention and change the perspective that the United States was taking at the time. So maybe something good came out of it that way. But we also see them giving their lives for the people that they cared for.

What a contrast it is to see some people giving their lives in love for a suffering people, and then to see some people going and taking other people's lives like I think we saw this week and have seen way too many times.

How do we approach suffering? Do we allow the love of God that is poured into our hearts to enable us to see it, to walk toward it, to walk beside it, to walk through it? Or do we find some other way of trying to deal with it?

I think Jesus was telling Peter that there is only one way to resurrection. I don't just mean that final resurrection. I mean the way life reappears in our lives. I think life really reappears when we've walked through it, when we've depended on the love of God, when we've endured, and trust in the love of God has enabled us to have hope. And hope brings new life. I think Jesus invites us on to the goal of the heavenly calling, which in many ways is the righteousness of God, being in right relationship with one another and with God. For some reason that sometimes means walking through suffering. As much as I wish it could all be roses, there are the thorns. There are the tears and the laughter. Somehow God invites us to walk through it all and find that as we trust in him, as we accept the way he forgives us and invites us again into relationship and helps us see the wonder of a relationship with God, that we are invited to walk through the hardness, the suffering, the misery of affliction into the new life. Perhaps at times it's only the hope, and yet it is the hope out of which it springs.

In some ways when Jesus says you have to let go of your life to live life, I think he's inviting us to be, as he did, those who humble themselves and do God's will, willing to walk through the tears and the laughter, and in that, whether it's tears or laughter, to express the reconciling grace of God, to share the love, to do the life-changing work that walking through both laughter and tears together does. We are invited to be a people of hope, not by denying suffering, but by the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and our hope in the work of the Spirit to be people who walk through suffering together, and even walk to suffering and share it. Amen.