

“The Second Scary Word: Suffering”
March 8, 2009

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Mark 8:31-38

“Why does the Lord make a good man *suffer* like that?” This must be the hardest question a minister ever has to answer.

“Why does the Lord make a *good* man suffer like that?” It’s a question I don’t have an easy answer for, and the challenge of answering it two weeks ago was all the greater because the “asker” is someone who has taught me about faith for nearly 40 years and the “good man” she was talking about is my own dad. On that day, on that phone call, all I could give was an honest but feeble response: “That’s a hard question. I’m not sure I have an answer.”

“Why does the Lord make a good man suffer like that?” There are countless ways of asking this important question, with different theological assumptions and different linguistic twists and turns. “Why does God *allow* suffering?” “Why doesn’t God *stop* suffering?” “Where is God in the midst of human suffering?” “Why did God create a world in which there is so much suffering?” But whatever the specific formulation, whatever the particular theological slant, whatever the unique human experience that prompts the questions, at their heart is the longing for an answer to the basic question, “Why suffering?”

And so, on this second Sunday of Lent, we come to the second scary word – suffering – and we encounter Jesus, telling his disciples that he himself *must* undergo great suffering. We also on this Sunday encounter Jesus teaching his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

We thus find ourselves on this second Sunday of Lent in tricky territory; we find ourselves in what I consider *dangerous* territory. We are in what has probably been the most *damaging* territory of the Christian tradition. We are in the place where, for centuries, theologians, priests, pastors, and people in the pews have wrestled with the same question: if Jesus’ teaching is true – if he *had* to suffer and die – *why* is it true?

Here in this territory, for centuries theologians and priests and pastors and people in the pews have struggled with this “why,” just as my teacher and friend struggles with her “why,” and many of them, but not all, have decided that Jesus had to suffer because God *required* it. Many, but not all, have concluded that it was only through Jesus’ suffering and death that God could forgive our sins (there’s our first scary word of this Lenten season). Many but not all have understood suffering itself as salvific, suffering as the very means of salvation. Many but not all have understood the Christian story in a way that leads to the assumptions in my teacher and friend’s question two weeks ago, that God *makes* people suffer, that the Holy One *sends* suffering on specific people at specific times for specific reasons.

This understanding of suffering – Jesus’ and our own – is part of the Christian tradition. I can’t deny or minimize that ... and I don’t want to dismiss it. It speaks the

truth to the hearts of the people to whom it speaks the truth, and it is neither my place nor my calling to tell them that they are wrong.

But an understanding of God and the gospel that rests on the notion that God *required* Jesus' suffering and death to be able to forgive and fully love the human race doesn't speak the truth to *my* heart, and it's not how I understand the gospel I promised to preach when I took my ordination vows three years ago.

No, the gospel I encounter in Jesus and in the Christian tradition offers something different. This gospel – this *good* news – issues a call to love, justice, and peace, which is a call to *reduce* suffering. It reveals God's promise to be with us all in our most painful moments. But what it does *not* offer is any complete, tidy, or easy *explanation* for suffering. Instead, the gospel Jesus preached seems to urge an acceptance of suffering as an inevitable part of human life. He reminded his disciples that life-giving rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous alike, and when the disciples were troubled by the sufferings of others, Jesus plainly rejected the idea that those who had been hurt or killed somehow *deserved* their suffering.

So if suffering isn't required to satisfy a vengeful or angry God and if the gospel doesn't offer a clear *explanation* of suffering, how, then can we live with it in our own lives and in the life of all the world? How can we live with suffering so that, when (not if) it comes, it doesn't crush us, and how can we live with it without becoming passive in the face of injustice and the suffering it causes?

The place I have to start is accepting Quaker writer Parker Palmer's simple statement: "There is no way to be human without having one's heart broken." If we *live*, we will experience loss, heartbreaking loss. Some losses will come from the passage of time – the loss of our childhoods, of our young adult selves, of friendships and relationships that lasted only a season or two. Others will be the searing losses of betrayal, the death of a child, or the disintegration of a family, a community, or even a nation into violence and chaos.

If we are alive, our hearts will inevitably break from one or two or tens of thousands of losses. If we risk loving, we risk the pain of loss. But if we don't risk loving, we will never know what it is to be truly human and alive.

Jesus says, if you want to follow me, if you want to live fully as my disciple, deny yourself and take up your cross. Be ready to lose your life in order to save it. *Deny* yourself and take up your cross. *Lose* your life so that you can gain it. It's easy to see why some people, past and present, understand Jesus' call to be a call to deny oneself joy and delight and to embrace suffering for the sake of suffering.

But I understand this foundational teaching of Jesus, which appears in all four gospels, as a different kind of teaching. I hear in these words an invitation to risk the fullness of life, an invitation to deny that who and what we *have been* limits forever who and what we *can* be, and an invitation to leave behind any hope or expectation that we can receive the gift of life God is offering us *today* while simultaneously holding tightly to the gifts we received *yesterday* or last week or last year.

The nature of human life is that new life, new gifts, new challenges, and, yes, new loss and pain await us. And the only way to welcome and receive this newness is to suffer the loss of our previous life, the loss of the gifts and challenges of the past. Life has heartbreak and suffering, not as punishment, not because pain and suffering have some value in and of themselves, but simply because there is no life without death, no

love without pain, no new gifts without making room for them by letting go of the gifts of the past.

Yes, suffering comes from injustice, cruelty, indifference, hate, and violence. I don't for a minute believe that the pain and loss arising from what we humans do out of our brokenness and fear, out of our inability to see the beauty of God in another, are pain and loss that God intends or sends or wills. But I do believe our freedom to choose between the paths of justice and injustice, our freedom to care or not to care, and our freedom to choose love or hate are all gifts from God that make human life *human*.

But whether our suffering comes from human vulnerability to sin and brokenness or it comes from the vary nature of life itself – something that is vulnerable to disease, loss, accident, and death – however suffering comes, we are not alone as we grieve and as we struggle. And whether or not we can see it in the moment, the Spirit of the Living God is seeking to bring a gift to us and to the world through our pain.

Christianity proclaims, through the agony of Good Friday, that God knows, shares, and bears our pain and suffering *with* us. Christianity proclaims that God can *and does* transform and redeem the loss, the suffering, the betrayal, and the violence that continue to mark human life. Christianity proclaims that this transformation comes because love is stronger than death, because, as the psalmist wrote so long ago, weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

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“Why does the Lord make a good man suffer like that?”

I still don't have an easy answer. But I am willing to offer this partial answer: I don't think God *makes* anyone suffer. All of us suffer to some degree, and some of us suffer greatly. Whatever the causes, whatever the amount of our pain and loss, the Holy One surrounds us in grace and compassion as our hearts break yet again, and into these broken hearts flow God's blessing and love so that our hearts can grow larger and larger and larger, until they're big enough to hold the entire world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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