

**LENT – A JOURNEY TO EASTER**  
**3. THE MEANING OF SUFFERING**

(03/15/2020)

Scripture Lessons: James 5:7-16  
Mark 10:32-34

*“Are any among you suffering? They should pray.”* (James 5:13a)

Today is the third Sunday in Lent. The season of Lent, the time set aside in preparation for the celebration of Easter, is forty days (and six Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. The liturgical color for Lent is purple, symbolizing repentance, or sometimes crimson, symbolizing Jesus’ passion, his suffering both physically, from his crucifixion, and emotionally, from his disciples’ betrayal and desertion.

Before we begin our reflections, I would note that this is the first week that our church, in compliance with Governor Baker’s restrictions on public gatherings and the counsel of the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ, has suspended Sunday morning worship, Sunday morning Bible study, Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group, all board and committee meetings, and all church gatherings until further notice.

It is an unusual experience--preaching from the pulpit to an empty church. Actually, it’s not exactly empty; Bob L’Heureux, our Deacon Emeritus and Administrative Assistant, is doing the recording. So, I have a congregation of one this morning. That’s less than I usually have on Sunday mornings. Not a lot less, as you will note from my February 23 sermon, but still less.

I am not one given to panic or hysteria. I am not a big fan of the apocalypse. My experience lends credence to a quote from Captain Yossarian in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*: “Insanity is contagious.” Nevertheless, out of an abundance of caution, an abundance of care, and an abundance of love, we are taking reasonable and responsible steps to protect our parishioners and guests from contracting or spreading the coronavirus. Because our church is not comprised of a young demographic, many of our parishioners fall into the at-risk category. Even your own in-person or online Pastor, who is now 77 years old (I know that’s hard to believe!) and who has asthma and a collapsed lung, *technically* falls into the vulnerable category.

The point is, I am happy to be able to be present to you this morning through the online printed and audio versions of my reflections. I’m sorry you can’t be with us in prayer, hear our

choir and organist, and join in the singing of the old-time hymns, but I am glad we can be together any way we can.

We began our Lenten journey two weeks ago with the theme of repentance, with the prophet Joel's call to "rend our heart." Last week we explored Jesus' teaching that Christianity is primarily not a religion but a relationship. This morning, although the liturgical color we use in this church for Lent is purple, I would like us to think about what is symbolized in the alternative color, crimson. Passion and suffering are important parts of Holy Week and important parts of our lives as well. They are important parts of the story, and they are important parts of the redemptive process.

Holy Week starts with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The story goes downhill from there, and it goes downhill very quickly. After the cleansing of the temple, which I am sure annoyed the religious authorities, Jesus' days are numbered. On Thursday, he prays alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. In this prayer he struggles with the tension between God's will and his own desire to avoid the painful events that await him. Immediately following his return to his sleeping disciples, he is betrayed by one of his followers and is arrested by the Roman soldiers.

As recorded in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is brought before Caiaphas, the high priest, who accuses him of blasphemy. The council, the scribes and the elders, spit in his face, strike him, slap him, and demand his death. The next morning, they bind Jesus and take him to Pontius Pilate, the governor. Pilate, after unsuccessfully trying to get Jesus to answer to him, accedes to the demands of the crowd and turns him over to the Romans to be crucified. Jesus is mocked and whipped. He is forced to carry his cross through the city streets to Golgotha, "the place of the skull," where he is crucified between two thieves. He dies a slow and agonizing death, abandoned by those who professed to be his followers. At the end, according to Matthew, only Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, James and John, are present—three women. Lent begins with repentance; it ends with suffering.

Although we may prefer to gloss over this matter of suffering in Jesus' life, suffering is an integral part of the resurrection narrative and the resurrection experience. When we skip from Palm Sunday to Easter without going through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we sacrifice the depth dimension of redemption. This prevents us from seeing deeper into our own lives, our own suffering, and the importance of suffering in our own redemption and rebirth.

Several years ago, some of us attended a screening of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*. This film was a graphic depiction of the terrible pain that Jesus endured through the scourging and the crucifixion. Critics of the film suggested that the pain, the suffering, the cruelty was probably overdone, that the Romans would not have done this to a condemned person. They pointed out, I believe rightly, that the passion is only a part of Holy Week, only a part of the redemption story, and it does not have the importance that Mr. Gibson attaches to it.

Though the film may not have been historically accurate or theologically balanced, it made an important point. It reminds us that if we jump from the triumph and joy of Palm Sunday to the triumph and joy of Easter, we are not honoring the valleys as well as the mountaintops, the depths as well as the heights, the dark as well as the light, the tragedy as well as the triumph. The film reminds us of the importance of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday in Jesus' life and in the life of the disciples. It reminds us that the experience of suffering and the experience of death are important parts of life, are integral parts of the spiritual journey.

Despite our adherence to what is known as the pleasure principle, the desire to increase pleasure and decrease pain, suffering is an important part of life. It is an important part of our life. In his play *Agamemnon*, the Greek playwright Aeschylus, who lived from 525-456 B.C.E., wrote, "By suffering comes wisdom." The poet Samuel Butler wrote,

*And poets by their sufferings grow,  
As if there were no more to do,  
To make a poet excellent  
But only want and discontent. (Fragments)*

According to the ancients, suffering, while not a lot of fun, is a great teacher. It shapes us deeply. Think about it. Think about your struggles, the burdens you have carried in your life. Think of the times you have suffered. I suspect these times, these events, these experiences have shaped you, have shaped your soul just as deeply as your moments of happiness. Perhaps even more deeply.

Suffering is like a refining fire. If we carry it well, if we take the right attitude toward it, it tempers our soul, just as fire can temper a steel blade. It purifies by burning away impurities. It gives rise to wisdom. It is an integral part of the process of transformation. It leads to resurrection, to new life. Scripture tells us that the way Job endured his undeserved suffering

brought him wisdom and a deeper insight into the nature of God. The book of Hebrews tells us Christ was perfected in/by/through suffering, depending on which translation we read.

However, not all suffering is transformative. Not all suffering is to be borne with the “patience of Job.” Much of our suffering is unnecessary. It is caused not by outer events or circumstances but by our own choices. When we make unwise choices, choices that bring suffering upon us or other people, this kind of suffering is not transformative. This suffering may be helpful in that it can lead us to examine the choices we made and provide us with an impetus to change. Through the process of honest reflection and repentance, suffering, e.g., psychological symptoms, can lead us to return to the fullness of life that God intends for us.

A variation of this second kind of suffering arises not from our unwise or unhealthy choices but from our attitudes. Our Buddhist brothers and sisters tell us that much, if not most of our suffering is caused by a combination of ignorance and grasping. The ignorance of which they speak is our failure to grasp the basic principles of impermanence and interconnectedness. The grasping or attachment of which they speak is our desire to hold onto everything that gives us pleasure and distance ourselves from everything that gives us pain, i.e., it arises from a self-centered or ego-centric life stance grounded in the pleasure principle.

If our suffering arises from unwise decisions, unhealthy choices, ignorance of the true Way, or the kind of grasping that arises from thinking that life should give us what we want and only what we want, this kind of suffering is not transformative. This kind of suffering only leads to more suffering. This suffering will not make you wiser; it will only make you miserable. Then you will make others miserable.

When we look at the events of Holy Week, we find that Jesus teaches us several important lessons about how we might experience and handle suffering, how we can transform even unjust or undeserved suffering into a transformative experience, the kind of experience that can lead to depth, to redemption, and to resurrection. He not only teaches his disciples and us about suffering; he shows us how to carry it, how to transform it into new life.

First, instead of attempting to flee from the suffering that life brings us, we can move toward it. We can choose it. I think it is important to remember that Jesus chose to go to Jerusalem. By choosing to endure the pain of the crucifixion in the service of a higher calling, a

higher good, the calling of love, Jesus tells his accusers that he is not a victim. His enemies cannot take something from him, even his life, because he has already willingly given it up.

In Herman Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, Siddhartha tells the merchant Kamaswami that one of his strengths is his ability to fast. When he is asked why this is a strength, Siddhartha replies that if you don't have any food on a given day you can feel miserable and angry. However, if you decide to fast that day, you turn the lack into a spiritual discipline. At the end of the day you may be hungry, but you will not be angry.

If you don't have a lot of money, or a lot of material possessions, or as much as you want, or at least not as much as your neighbors, you can be envious of them. This will cause you suffering. You could also choose to live a simple life, to embrace the joys of a simple life. In the first case you will be envious; you will feel cheated. In the second you will feel joy and peace. Same set of conditions, different responses. You may not be able to own a Tesla Model 3 or a BMW 7-series, but at least you will not be miserable. You will not be constantly complaining about it, feeling like a victim, and bringing it up time and time again in your sermons!

Second, Jesus teaches that suffering is a part of life. It is an important part of life. It is not an injustice, something to be eliminated. In our scripture lesson this morning, he tells his disciples that he will suffer. He chooses to do this out of his great love for them and for the world. He tells them that death is an important part of life, an integral part of the spiritual journey. He tells them that a grain of wheat has to fall into the ground and die if it is to bear fruit. I suspect that the disciples didn't realize that he was talking not only about the grain of wheat and about himself, but also about them. Or perhaps they hoped he wasn't!

This is where our faith helps us to challenge the pleasure principle, the belief that pleasure is good and pain is bad, and that the purpose of life is to increase pleasure and decrease pain. This is more a part of our culture and our psychology than we know. The problem is that pain is a part of life, especially as we get older. Our body begins its inevitable decline. Loved ones die. If we have no faith, we shrink from the black hole of death. These experiences, these life experiences that could potentially deepen our soul, just make us depressed and miserable.

One of the great lessons of the Bible is the number of people who found joy in the most difficult situations. They not only accepted the life that God had given them to live, they

embraced it with gratitude in their heart. The disciples finally learned this lesson. This transformed them into apostles, into people who were willing to suffer and die for what they believed, to suffer and die in the service of their higher calling.

This is the challenge for us: to find joy in life's difficult situations. If we follow Jesus' example, an important part of this discovery will come through taking the focus off of us, our travails, and focusing on other people, on reaching out to them. I think we all know people who are suffering greatly, but when we visit them, we find they are genuinely concerned about us. This is not only humbling; it is a teaching.

Finally, I have often heard it said that one of the great things about being a Christian is that we don't have to do anything to be saved; Christ has done it for us. I don't believe this. I have also heard it said that one of the great things about being a Christian is that we don't have to suffer; Christ has suffered for us. I also don't believe this, and I don't think this is a healthy attitude to bring toward the pain and suffering that are an inevitable part of our life.

Jesus didn't suffer *for* us. He showed us *how* to suffer. He showed us how, if we have faith and love, our suffering can be transformed into joy, our darkness into light, and our death into resurrection and new life.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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