

LENT 3. THE MEANING OF SUFFERING

(03/23/2025)

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 scourging and crucifixion, and emotionally, from his disciples’ betrayal and desertion.

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 for Lent, 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 his 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 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 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are present—three women. Three women.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and the theme of 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 central importance that Mr. Gibson attaches to it.

Though the film may not have been historically accurate or theologically balanced, I believe 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 of Holy Week. The experience of suffering and the experience of death are important parts of Holy Week; they are important parts of life; they are integral parts of the spiritual journey.

Despite our individual and collective embrace of what Sigmund Freud called the pleasure principle, the desire to increase our pleasure and decrease our 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 late 19th century English novelist, poet, and critic 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)*

The medieval alchemists, when talking about wisdom, the true wisdom that is different from knowledge, often used the term *sal sapientia*. *Sal sapientia* means the wisdom of salt. I take this to mean that the life experiences that evoke tears in us, since tears are salty, are an important part of wisdom.

According to the ancients, suffering, while admittedly 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 and pleasure. Perhaps even more deeply.

Suffering is like a refining fire—or it can be. *If we carry it well, if we take the right attitude toward it*, it can temper our soul, just as fire can temper a steel blade. *If we carry it well*, it purifies by burning away impurities. It gives rise to wisdom. According to the alchemists, the process they called *calcinatio*--the experience of inner fire or conflict as well as outer fire or conflict, is an integral part of the process of transformation in our spiritual journey to wholeness. It leads to resurrection, to new life.

I have a sense 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 that Christ was perfected in/by/through suffering, depending on which translation we read. In Hebrews 5:7-10, in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, we read:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard through his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

However, as we know, not all suffering is transformative. Sometimes pain or suffering is inflicted upon us, and it can destroy us. Think of innocent people in countries torn by war. Think of little children who are born with cancer. Think of our brothers and sisters who are starving to death in a world that has more than enough food to go around. Think of all who suffer the effects of emotional trauma.

Even here, I find it helpful to make a distinction between pain and suffering. As the Buddhists say, “Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.” Even in terrible situations, in painful situations, if we face into the pain, if we accept that pain is a part of life, of our life, we do not need to experience the kind of emotional suffering that poisons our soul. In fact, the way we respond to the pain may shape our soul in a beautiful, in a meaningful way.

This past year I read a book entitled *Notebooks of a Wandering Monk*. It was written by the Tibetan Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, who is my new favorite spiritual teacher. Ricard has a strong background in philosophy and quantum physics. He translates the Dalai Lama’s writings into French. He has established a foundation, Karuna Shechen, a mission that has helped more than 450,000 underprivileged people every year for the past twenty-two years in India, Nepal, and Tibet. And yes, I am thinking that I would like to go over to Nepal, where he lives, and meet him. I would love to discuss the deep connectedness between the teachings and

the life of Jesus and the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. I think that both Jesus and the Buddha draw from the same underground river.

I would like to read a passage from this book. It was a passage that brought me to tears when I read it and, as we know, when I am moved to tears by something, it is a sign that God has reached in past my defenses and touched my heart, my soul in a way that they need to be touched. The passage describes the powerful emotional event of a Tibetan Buddhist refugee when he/she meets the Dalai Lama in person. It is the last line of this paragraph that touched my heart.

Meetings with Tibetans who have come all the way from the high plateau of the Land of Snows are always emotional events. To see the Dalai Lama, if only once in their lifetimes, some have to cross snowbound passes more than 16,000 feet high and dodge the Chinese army guarding the borders, since most Tibetans are unable to get permission to leave China. And yet they somehow manage to defy the proscription and cannot hold back their tears of joy when the Dalai Lama inquires, in his deep, resonant voice, about their personal odyssey and the situation in Tibet. [The Dalai Lama] asked one monk who had spent twenty years in prison and been tortured again and again if he had been afraid. The monk humbly ducked his head: "My greatest fear was that I would come to hate my torturers," he replied. (page 411)

"My greatest fear was that I would come to hate my torturers." What do you think about that? I find it deeply humbling. I would hope that I could take that kind of stance toward those who were torturing me, but I'm not sure I could; in fact, I am quite sure I couldn't. When I hear or read what that monk said, I get curious about his religion, his spirituality. I want to know what made him the person he is. To be quite frank, I want what that monk has. If I did, my life would be different.

There is no doubt that the twenty years of torture inflicted tremendous pain on this humble monk. But it couldn't break his spirit. He did not experience the suffering that we experience when we feel that life is unfair or that people are being mean to us. I believe his suffering was transformed through compassion into compassion. His life was a prayer for those who tortured him.

How is this different from Jesus who, while he was wracked with the pain of his crucifixion, said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"? His suffering was transformed through compassion into compassion. His last moments were a living prayer for those who tortured him.

As we know, much of what we experience and describe as suffering is unnecessary; if we were psychologically inclined, we could call it neurotic suffering. It is caused not by outer events or circumstances but by our own choices, by the way we view life or the way we live it.

When we make unwise choices, choices that bring suffering upon us or other people, this kind of suffering is not transformative. This kind of pain and 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, even psychological symptoms can lead us to return to God and to the fullness of life that God intends for us.

This kind of suffering, neurotic suffering, can arise not from our unwise or unhealthy choices, but also from our attitudes. Our Buddhist brothers and sisters tell us that most of our suffering is caused by a combination of grasping, ignorance, and delusion. The ignorance of which they speak is our failure to grasp the basic principles of impermanence and deep interconnectedness. The delusion of which they speak is the delusion that I am a separate being from you, that I am here, and you are out there, and that the world revolves around me and me alone. 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 that is grounded in the pleasure principle. This suffering will not make you wiser; it will only make you miserable. Then you will make others miserable.

All is not lost, however. We just need to remember that humble monk. We just need to remember Jesus. And then we know that there is another Way.

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, Jesus tells us that 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, the calling of love, Jesus shows his accusers and us that he is not a victim. His enemies cannot take something from him, even his life, because he has already willingly given it up for his friends. And we are his friends.

In Herman Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, Siddhartha tells the merchant Kamaswami that one of his strengths is his ability to fast. When Kamaswami asks 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 of available food into a spiritual discipline. At the end of the day, you may be hungry (actually, you probably *will* be hungry, whether you call it a fast or not), but you will not be angry. You will not feel like a victim.

If you don't have a lot of money, or a lot of material possessions, or as much as you want, or as much as Taylor Swift, who has a couple of really nice houses in Massachusetts, 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 Porsche 911 Turbo and a summer home on the Cape, 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 when you repeatedly hint that you really deserve a raise!

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 grains of wheat, but also about himself and about them. Or perhaps they hoped he wasn't!

This is where our faith helps us to challenge 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. As you may have noticed, our body, this transient form to which we are attached, begins its inevitable decline. Our knees ache. Our memory fails us. Word retrieval comes a little slower. 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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