

Why Suffer!

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost
N. Farnham & St. John's Episcopal Churches
June 14, 2020 – The Rev. Torrence Harman

Sermon Text: Romans 5:1-8

The ancient Hebrew prophet Isaiah coined the phrase. Jesus put flesh on it. Paul boasts about it. Paul not only boasts about it, he celebrates it. Identity as a “suffering servant.”

Suffering. Siddhartha Guatama (the “Buddha”) four hundred years before Christ spent at least one lifetime trying to understand the why of pain and suffering and teaching ways to deal with suffering oriented to avoiding it, with a goal of being liberated from suffering into new life without it. Jesus, of course, lived into the suffering servant way of life Isaiah predicted for a Messiah, ultimately embracing suffering as a way of life, and showing how such a way can lead to resurrected new life beyond suffering. While both Siddhartha's and Jesus' pathways involve the theme of suffering and both highlight rebirth/new life, there seems to be a significant difference in how to seek and find that new life. The Buddha's teachings focus on **overcoming** suffering to be liberated from it to achieve rebirth. Jesus' teachings as modeled in the way he lived his earthly life involve **embracing** suffering as the way of life that leads through suffering to new life.

The last time I taught a religion course at Haynesville prison here in Richmond County – a course on World Religions – it surprised me how many of the twenty-six men I taught zeroed in on the “Four Noble Truths” about suffering, essential to the Buddha's teaching and then “The Noble Eightfold Path to Liberation.” Our excellent textbook introduced the Buddha's Noble Path as follows and perhaps offers some insight as to its appeal to those incarcerated at Haynesville prison who so desperately wanted liberation.

“The Buddha set forth a systematic approach so that human beings could extricate themselves from suffering and achieve the final goal of liberation. By following this path, we can live a happy life and also create the causes for a favorable rebirth, and the peace of nirvana.”

It has been said, “Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.” Perhaps this comes from a reflection on Buddhist teachings and the idea that while we humans are going to experience pain, whether we “suffer” or not is a result of our perception of our pain and that in some way we can manage and control our reaction to pain so as to avoid suffering entirely. We could spend a lot of time and conversation trying to exactly define the difference between pain and suffering, but the bottom line is that there does seem to be some differences, subtle or not, between the two. But also a sense that they are interrelated, that suffering arises because of something painful.

In the current edition of *Presence*, the international journal of Spiritual Direction published by the organization Spiritual Directors International there is an excellent article titled “Sitting with Suffering.” The author offers the following:

“I have heard it said, ‘Pain is inevitable – suffering is optional.’ I do not agree. I believe that suffering is not optional. Into every life, some suffering must come. It is an essential feature of being human. What we can choose, though is how we relate to that suffering. What is our angle of relatedness to the suffering? Do we run from it? Do we walk head-on, willy-nilly, into suffering, with a false sense of bravado? Or do we treat suffering – *pathos* – with the respect and gravitas it deserves. It is in our choices in the face of suffering that our true mettle shows. It is up to us whether we suffer neurotically or, using (Carl) Jung’s terminology, ‘legitimately.’”

This author’s words completely resonated with my life and my experience over time working and being with others in the context of serving as a family law attorney and mediator, an ordained clergy person, a spiritual director and, most critically, just being “me” as a human living through the highs, lows and in between times and experiences of life for seventy-six years. It is in the “pastoral” aspects of all those roles, as well as trying to live with myself, that I have come to so deeply appreciate what Paul has to offer in Romans. Here are those words in our Epistle passage for today

“We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

The “why” of suffering? Probably the most provocative and baffling question humankind asks of its God. In a terribly simplistic theological response, all I can come up with is we suffer because we are human. We have been given freedom of choice to live in alignment with the Divine will and purpose for us or not. Experience with Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, however, offer story lines connecting the human and the Divine which seem to evidence that in either way we may choose, alignment or mis-alignment with Divine purposes, our way will involve suffering.

How interesting that Paul seems to characterize suffering as a gift. What Paul presents us with today is the opportunity that suffering offers us. A sense that suffering molds us in a rhythm that strengthens, encourages, and leads us to experience a closer and closer understanding of how loved we essentially are. While Paul builds towards a shift in us towards our own hopefulness, I wonder if the essential truth he is trying to express is about God’s hope for us, his “creation.” God’s deepest desire that his hope for us and our hope for ourselves ultimately meet and embrace in a one-ness of desire and action. The Holy Spirit poured into our hearts drawing our spirits towards a heart center out of which more abundant life can emerge. As the gift of suffering at work within us leads us through the process Paul describes we are led into the location of “our

hearts.” It is in “our hearts” that the alchemy of suffering ultimately transforms life. Not only our own, but potentially those with whom we are called into relationship by God.

As a family law attorney some of the saddest cases I handled were ones where a young person came to me seeking a divorce after only months or a couple of years of marriage. The couple had hit a bump in the road, a crisis, and the only way out of the pain and woundedness they were experiencing seemed to one or both of them to be separation and divorce. Years later as a clergy person working with couples planning marriage, I came to a sense that this morning’s passage from Paul about suffering was something essential to share with them. Cautioning them that there would be times in their relationship that trials and tribulations, crisis times would occur. We would even play around with some of the types of challenge that can impact a relationship, considering ways not “out” but “through.” Perhaps, in their relationship they had already been through some of these crises. Such wonderful “grist for the mill” as they considered what had worked, what had not, and how they had made it through such a time, after all. I watched as they took great strength from what they had discovered during such times. And their sense that they could have confidence for times to come. And always, always we lingered over the words that begin the marriage ceremony, “Dearly beloved, here in the presence of God, come. . .” followed by their names. The reality that they are never alone, their relationship has its origin in and is integrally entwined with the presence of a sustaining and loving Divine, something to access at any time when greater than human strength is needed to carry us through.

The word suffering originates from the Latin *sufferer* which means to bear, undergo, endure, carry, coming from the roots *sub*, meaning “under,” and *ferre*, meaning “to carry, bear.” This offers an understanding of Christ’s life and gift to us. Jesus embraced suffering, becoming the “suffering servant” as Isaiah foresaw and prophesied. Carrying, bearing the pain that those who suffered in Christ’s world were experiencing – bearing it not just **for** them but **with** them. Then showing in the resurrection the Divine desire and hope that by sharing and bearing each other’s suffering we may be led to new and more abundant life beyond it. The cross does not relieve us of pain and suffering, it offers the reality that there is one who understands and experiences suffering, will walk with us during our pain, throughout our times of suffering and offer us hope of moving beyond the pain. Christ affirms that human life does involve suffering but that suffering when lodged in compassion can lead to larger life for us and those with whom we are called to be with. Compassion, meaning with passion and love, connects us with each other in solidarity of willingness to “suffer with” in the hope of better, newer life and the courage (the heart strength) to live into it. It is this “amazing grace” that follows the pouring into and dwelling within our hearts of a Divine Holy Spirit that leads to overflowing life. How sweet is the sound of this Way of Love as we find, with God’s help and Christ’s love, that our inevitable human suffering can strengthen our endurance, mold us into the character that the Divine hopes for our living a life of hope and finally give us the courage to trust a Divine affirmation that “all will be well” when we open our hearts (as risky as such a process is) to a Spirit that offers the abundance of new life.

May we take Paul’s words to heart and celebrate the Way of Love that it may be so . . .

Torrence