

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

March 17, 2024

Suffering

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the insights I have particularly appreciated from the book study we're doing right now has to do with suffering. The insight comes from the Rev. Nicole Garcia, the first queer, transgender Latina pastor ordained in the ELCA, and someone who knows both the feeling of suffering and oppression. Rev. Garcia shares: "There's a difference between suffering willingly, like Jesus did, and suffering at the hands of other people without any choice in the matter. Christ accepted our sins. He took them on himself and he suffered because he chose to suffer, whereas so many people now who are dying and being murdered aren't choosing that. It is thrust upon them."¹

This is an important distinction for followers of the Way. We are not called to suffer simply for the sake of suffering. Nor are we called to tell those experiencing suffering (or oppression) that their suffering is somehow beneficial or salvific. Unfortunately, this is a practice that the church has struggled with for a long time. The church has been too comfortable telling domestic abuse victims that their suffering was somehow a good thing, for the sake of the marriage or the children or whatever. There are other examples too, but you get the idea.

Willingly taking on suffering is one thing, but having it inflicted on you is quite another. And we do willingly take on suffering at times. Breaking bad habits, or forming new ones, often involves some suffering. Choosing advanced courses in school or pursuing intentionally challenging work can lead to suffering. There can be suffering when we join certain groups as we find our place within them. There is often some suffering involved in being in a relationship with someone, the growing pains of learning to live together for example. Even the choice to have children involves suffering. All those sorts of suffering are sorts we generally take on willingly (though not always). This sort of willing suffering can have some positives to it, but that is entirely within

¹ Rev. Nicole Garcia as cited in "Transforming" by Austen Hartke, Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

the perspective/experience of the one doing the suffering. But willingly entering suffering often leads to growth and maturity, as well as deeper self-understanding and compassion towards the world. Or, as Brother Richard Rohr puts it:

“Suffering is the only force strong enough to destabilize the imperial ego. The separate and sufficient self has to be led to the edge of its own resources until it learns to draw upon its Deepest Source. Various forms and times of suffering and love gradually move us towards who we are in God and who God is in us. The genius of Jesus’ teaching is that he reveals that God uses tragedy, suffering, pain, betrayal, and death itself, not to wound us but, in fact, to bring us to a Larger Identity: ‘Unless the single grain of wheat loses its shell, it remains just a single grain’ (see John 12:24). The shell must first crack for the expanded growth to happen. In such a divine economy, everything can be transmuted, everything can be used, and nothing is wasted – not even our mistakes.”²

It is this sort of suffering that Christ invites his followers to on his Way. The suffering that is taken on willingly, and for the sake of others and creation. The sort of suffering that opens our eyes to the suffering of others and draws us to them in compassion and love. The sort of suffering that cracks our hearts open wider to the deep love and grace at work in the world. I believe this is what Jesus meant when he talked about “those who hate their life in this world” who “will keep it for eternal life.”³ Our lives in this world have to be cracked open in order to know and experience the in-breaking of the kingdom and culture of God.

At the other end of the spectrum is the sort of suffering that is inflicted upon people from outside sources, which is better termed oppression. And while **suffering** can have positives (though not always), **oppression** is entirely negative...entirely evil. Last week I mentioned the Scapegoat theory of atonement, the understanding that Christ’s crucifixion was not to appease a wrathful God (that’s Substitutionary Atonement), but rather the inevitable outcome of human-perpetuated cycles of violence. Scapegoat theory also understands that Christ is the final scapegoat and that when we scapegoat and oppress others today, we always include Jesus in that scapegoating and oppression.

² Rohr, R. (2018). *Just this: Prompts And Practices For Contemplation*. SPCK. pp. 82-83.

³ John 12:25 (NRSVue)

From this point of view Jesus willingly takes on, not just the suffering of the world, but all the world's oppression, hatred, derision, violence, and evil as well. Now, this sort of holistic, salvific action is beyond the capability of those of us walking Christ's Way, but it does communicate something powerful about the priorities and values of it. Namely, that followers of the Way are called to stand, with Christ, on the side of the oppressed, on the side of the victim, the displaced refugee seeking asylum, the desperate, hungry immigrant, the unhoused transgender teenager who's been kicked out by their family, the starving women and children being murdered while standing in breadlines, the lowly and despised addict, the abandoned elderly poor and the lonely veteran with untreated PTSD, all of the marginalized and the oppressed.

We can see this at play in Christ's prophecy at the end of our appointed Gospel text today: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."⁴ The powers that be of this world...the ruler of this world... those forces at work in this world that inflict suffering on others...that oppress others, they **will** be driven out! Christ is showing us our desperate need to break the perpetual cycles of violence that humanity is trapped in.

Jesus' prophecy then continues with this powerful image of drawing all people to himself. ALL PEOPLE. As I reflect on the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ I conclude that Christ became Incarnate primarily for the sake of the suffering. But here's the thing...we're all suffering. In one way or another. Even oppressors know suffering, in many cases those that oppress do so out fear of being oppressed themselves, or out of their own experiences of being oppressed. That's certainly no excuse for their oppressing others, but it does illustrate the drastic need for **all people** to be drawn to God. No wonder then, that Christ must draw all people to himself, his aim is to overcome the suffering and oppression of the world and show us a different Way. A Way where suffering is only ever entered into willingly and for the sake of others and creation.

"Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."⁵ Christ leads us into the suffering places of the world. Christ stands at the bleeding heart of the world, the cross. To serve means to follow Christ into such suffering. Not **all** the world's suffering, we don't have that capacity.

⁴ John 12:31-32 (NRSVue)

⁵ John 12:26 (NRSVue)

But we can try to stand in solidarity with and enter into some small measure of the world's suffering. And, standing in solidarity with those being oppressed, we can call for justice, healing, reconciliation, mercy, peace, and all of the other values of the kingdom and the Way. Amen.