

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Redemptive Suffering...Isn't

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

It is important to know the difference between descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptive language describes things as they are; whereas prescriptive language seeks to describe things as they *should be*. As a quick example:

Descriptive: Many people today feel disconnected from community. They're overwhelmed by work, distracted by technology, and unsure where to turn for real relationships.

Prescriptive: God calls us to love one another deeply. Let's commit to being present, to listening well, and to building authentic relationships in our church family.

Keep this distinction in mind as it will be key later. Now, we're done with the English lesson for a bit, let's turn to the text.

Jesus is addressing a large crowd of people in our Gospel text today. And he seems to be issuing a warning to anyone in the crowd who might have been contemplating becoming his disciple. There is a dear cost to discipleship. Jesus lays out what that cost could be: the breaking of fundamental relationships, cross-carrying, all your possessions, even one's life.

This isn't the only place where Jesus lays this cost out either. In Luke 9 we hear Jesus explain, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves

and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”¹ Then, just a few verses later Jesus encounters two would-be disciples who wish to follow him but have reasonable delays. The one needing to bury his father and the other wishing to first say goodbye to his family.² Jesus responds negatively to both and states: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”³

Clearly following Jesus has a great cost to it. Jesus emphasizes in several instances that it will affect our relationships, even our closest ones. We hear in all four Gospels that following Jesus requires total commitment. We cannot “serve two masters.”⁴ And this is the most common sermon preached on this text. The cost of following Jesus.

That’s not what I want to focus on today though. Rather I want to look at how texts like these have been misused by the church (and society) to oppress and exclude. It goes like this: Do you see the heavy cost of following Jesus? All that business about carrying your cross. Well, that means your suffering is a part of your journey of faith! Whatever terrible situation you are undergoing, whatever illness or loss you know is a part of your journey to heaven! Just endure it! Your suffering is reminiscent of Jesus’! It’s redemptive! Don’t complain! It’s your lot in life!

Out of this theological context comes ideas and comments like:

- Don’t leave your spouse even though they abuse you, it’s your cross to bear!
- You’re hungry and poor? Too bad, that’s just your lot in life!
- Someone in power over you is taking advantage of you? Maybe if you suffer long enough, you’ll eventually be rewarded.

¹ Luke 9:23–27 (NRSVUE)

² Luke 9:57-62 (NRSVUE)

³ Luke 9:62b (NRSVUE)

⁴ Luke 16:13 (NRSVUE)

- You must forgive them even though they're still actively harming you!
It's what Jesus would want.

The problem with redemptive suffering is that it reads all of the aforementioned teachings of Christ as prescriptive when they are really intended to be descriptive. Jesus isn't telling us we **should** suffer when following him. He is simply warning us that following him will **inevitably lead** to these costly things happening.

Christ alone redeems us from our brokenness. Christ alone redeems us from our selfish ways. Christ alone redeems us for life abundant and life eternal. A person's suffering does not redeem them. Followers of the Way should seek to ease suffering, not exploit it or pressure people to endure it to keep our lives simpler and conflict-free.

Rather than continue to preach it, the church needs to end the idea of redemptive suffering. It is nonsense to being with, but it is also harmful nonsense! Redemptive suffering suggests a sadistic God when you think about it. Redemptive **suffering** would only appeal to someone who enjoys making others suffer, and that is not God.

The vision of the Kingdom of God that Christ brings is a place where suffering is no more. Where pain and loss and grief are no more. The Kingdom of God is a place where people's needs are met and the worth and dignity of all is recognized. Centering this Kingdom means working against all that stands in its way, including dangerous and evil ideas like "redemptive suffering."

If we must make meaning out of suffering, let it drive us to deeper compassion and empathy. Two essential values to following the Way. Two values that the world regularly derides. And out of that compassion and

empathy we can work towards a world without suffering, a world more closely aligned to the Kingdom of God. Amen.