

Why Must We Suffer?

We have begun the 40 days plus Sundays of Lent. Ash Wednesday was quite different this year to previous years. I know for many folks from Knox United, Ash Wednesday is not something significant in the life of the Church or in the cycle of the Christian calendar. And that's okay.

One of the things we see repeated in the Hebrew Scripture is the image of God as a punisher. If the creatures of the earth do not do as they are instructed to do, such as following the Ten Commandments, God punishes them. Examples of this are the destruction of Sodom, the treatment of Jonah and the flood which rained down forty days and forty nights, with only eight people surviving: Noah and his family.

Why is it that people must suffer? In today's reading Peter writes "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." (1 Peter 3.18, NRSV)

I struggle mightily with the notion that if you are a true believer you will never face suffering in your life.

I also detest the notion that God never gives us more than we can handle. From firsthand experience I can tell you this is not true. The images of God as a punishing parent, using tough love, makes me shudder. The God I worship is a God of love, forgiveness and mercy. A God of justice and freedom and action.

When I was growing up my Dad often used to tell me to "play the game". In other words, don't rock the boat, don't question the system or status quo. And for many years I did as I was told, never questioning, just grumbling quietly out of earshot. Until I received a poor grade on an essay I had written in my Grade 12 history class. We were told to write about a conflict, somewhere in the world and among a series of questions were to answer what was the cause of the conflict and would the conflict ever be solved. I chose the war in Northern Ireland. I said the conflict was about religion and as long as there was more than one Denomination there would be conflict. I researched thoroughly and presented my argument in a balanced and fair manner (in my humble opinion).

I received a failing grade because my teacher believed the conflict was about geography, and with proper mitigation and co-operation it would be solved. Please keep in mind that this was in 1984-85, during a renewed urgency in IRA bombings taking place in England. This was 14 years before the Good Friday Agreement, signed on 10 April 1998.

I was furious and brought my plea to my Dad. He told me I had to accept what I was given and get over it. For the first time in my life I disagreed. Well, it wasn't the first time I disagreed, but it was the first time I voiced my disagreement directly with my Dad. "Play the game" my Dad told me. "The game is rigged", I replied. "Follow the rules," my Dad said again. "The rules are WRONG", I pleaded. So he told me to take it to the Vice Principal of the school, which I did.

Pleading my case to the VP got me nowhere. He heard what I had to say, even agreed to read the essay, but at the end of the day, he said the final decision was up to the teacher. Again, I disagreed, but having been raised to be polite, I took my lumps. And the failing grade.

I am a natural advocate. When I see someone not being treated fairly, I will plead their case, on their behalf. I've spoken to various government ministers of health for increased funding for dialysis machines and cancer support services in outpost clinics in my previous working life.

When someone approaches me needing a sounding board I have to fight the urge to advocate to them...to give them advice about resources or actions, unless they ask for it. As I age, I'm learning that sometimes we need to simply be heard; we do not need someone to fix us, as we aren't broken in the first place.

Peter's letter references the flood narrative. Water has always been a powerful symbol in the Bible. God called a flood to wipe out all humanity and wildlife that were not in Noah's ark. Moses used his staff to strike a rock and bring forth water to quench the thirst of the followers during their Diaspora from Egypt and the Pharaoh.

God parted the red sea so that Moses and his followers could flee Egypt, and the Egyptians who followed were drowned when the parting of the sea ceased.

I have always struggled with that imagery. The Egyptians were holding the Hebrews as slaves. Moses pleaded for their release. After a series of unfortunate plagues, famines, floods and locusts, Pharaoh agreed to release them. Only to send his henchmen to recapture them. Did they deserve to be swept away and drowned?

Did Jesus deserve to be crucified?

Peter writes “baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience.” (1 Peter 3.22, NRSV)

Baptism is about public recognition. It’s not about an introduction to God. Baptism welcomes you publicly to the family of Christ, to your Church family, yet it is not the beginning of your relationship with God. Remember last week, I told you that God whispered “this is my child, with whom I am well pleased” when you were born? I absolutely, wholeheartedly believe that.

Baptism is not meant to wash away dirt, but to wash away sin. Similar to when Jesus was going to wash his disciples feet. It was a dirty, lowly job and at first Peter wanted no part of it. Because he didn’t understand. When Jesus explained that he had to do this, Peter then wanted his hands and face washed too. Because he didn’t understand.

So why do we have to suffer? If I live a good life, read my bible, water my plants, don’t harm anyone, be a generally nice person, isn’t that enough?

Apparently not. Let’s take another look in a slightly different way...

Paul writes to the Church in Rome “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.” (Romans 4.3b-5, NRSV)

We are called, as followers of Jesus, to live in the way of Jesus. Contrary to what some people would have you believe, we do not have to do this because Jesus died for our sins, and we are duty-bound to do this, but because we choose to emulate his life of sacrifice and service.

I'm sure each of you knows someone who is very involved in their Church, maybe even in leadership. They are respected in their Church, yet are not nice human beings. Going to Church no more makes you a follower of Jesus than going to a garage makes you a car. It's about intention.

How we define ourselves as followers of Jesus takes place outside of the four walls of the building. How we live our lives is what defines us. It's easy to believe when you are in a room filled with people who agree with you and with whom you agree. It's much more difficult when you are the sole believer of something and no-one else agrees with you, or is willing to stand up with you.

This doesn't mean we don't get afraid. This doesn't mean we doubt our faith. Of course we should. When a child is born with cancer or a baby dies at 28 days of age. When people we love suffer with mental illness or chronic illness, and there is nothing we can do, it can seem that we are being tested and it may seem that we are failing.

But here's the thing. God doesn't call us to be perfect. Certainly not in the way that society deems what perfect is. You know, long blonde hair, size 6, perfect teeth, no blemishes, covergirl types. That kind of "perfection" is superficial and doesn't last, no matter how much plastic surgery and botox you endure.

When we were created, it was in the image of God, which is nothing short of perfection. Yes, even the addicted, the homeless, the depressed, the poor, the rich, the binary, the non-binary, the transgender, the cis-gender, are all created in God's image. And that image is one of absolute perfection. God doesn't call us to **be** perfect; through God we are already **made** perfect.

To be a good person isn't enough. It's a great start, don't get me wrong. But if you don't live your life as a follower of Jesus, as someone who will help a stranger who needs a battery boost, or smile at a stranger, then you aren't really following in Jesus' footsteps. If you live only for yourself and your needs, then you aren't really following in Jesus' footsteps.

Throughout my adult life, I would talk to my Dad about things that I felt were unfair in the Church and in the world. He would listen carefully, and would always land on the same answer "play by the rules". When I had finished a particularly difficult conversation with my then-Bishop, I called my Dad in tears. He said what he usually says; "play by the rules". I said, through tears "What if the rules are unjust?"

His answer astounded me. He said "then work to change the rules". It's one of the best pieces of advice my Dad has ever given me. One I will always remember.

We are called to do our best. In the words of the late poet Maya Angelou "You did the best you knew how to do, and when you knew better, you did better." So yes, when we stumble and fall, we can stay down for a little while, but we are not to unpack and live there.

We are to dust ourselves off, and try again, and again, and again. Not because it's the right thing to do, but because it's what God is calling us to, and how Jesus would have us follow in his footsteps.

Not with judgment, but with love. It's how we are called to live our lives, not with condemnation and judgement, but in awe and wonder of the creation in which we live. With open, yet fragile hearts and with discerning, yet questioning minds.

To be as brave as a lion, even when our knees are knocking.
To be as generous as a child sharing a pack of gum with their friends.
To be as loving as the grumpy uncle who softens when you put his newborn nephew in his arms.
To speak the truth, even when our voice is shaking.

That is what we are called to do; that is who we are called to be. Suffering isn't something that is inflicted by God upon us for our sins. Suffering is a by-product of a mad world where oftentimes unfair things happen to good people. We can choose to let our sufferings burnish us in the fire, making us stronger, or we can let our sufferings overwhelm and defeat us.

God **will give you more than you can handle**. Not as punishment, or to test your resolve as a follower of Jesus. We are given God's greatest gifts, free will and Jesus. We are free to hope for tomorrow, for a better day, for a different outcome.

We are also called to speak out for the voiceless, to clothe the naked, feed the hungry. Because everytime we do this, we are serving one of God's children. We are not called to martyr ourselves when we simply can't. It's in those times we reach out, if we can, and ask for help. It is in those times we can wait and rest, until our strength returns.

"Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us." (Romans 3b-4, NRSV)
Always hold on to hope. Always.

Set down your suffering, rest, reflect and find hope. Because, chances are, behind the hope you'll find God's love. God's love, poured out, for you. For me. For us.

Thanks be to God.

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