

“Will I Suffer, Too?”
Mark 10:32-45
First Presbyterian Church
Marshfield, WI
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This third account of Jesus predicting his crucifixion and resurrection was not part of the lectionary reading for today. That text just focused on James’ and John’s request to sit on Jesus’ left and right when he came into his kingdom. But treating that account apart from what Jesus had just told them would not adequately highlight the total lack of understanding shown by James and John.

The first time Jesus told the disciples that he would have to suffer and die and be raised on the third day, Peter objected vociferously. “Lord, you don’t have to do that!” As a result, Jesus told Peter he was playing Satan’s role by denying Jesus’ essential act of love for our salvation. The second time he told them, the disciples simply didn’t understand, and were afraid to ask him what he meant. But this time, not only do the disciples not understand, but James and John are merely thinking about themselves and what they could get. There is no question that they believed Jesus to be the Messiah, but any comprehension of the Kingdom that required him to suffer and die to bring them and us to God was completely absent. What they wanted was power in the Kingdom.

I wonder if part of the reason the disciples appeared not to understand what Jesus was saying was because they didn’t want to understand. In the back of their minds, although unspoken, was probably the question, “Will I suffer, too?” Suffering is something none of us want in our lives. It is something that any normal human being would run from, if he or she could. But change, major change, rarely occurs in our lives without some sort of suffering. In actuality it is a major component of human life and change.

Richard Rohr, a Roman Catholic theologian makes this comment.

But transformation . . . more often *happens not when something new begins, but when something old falls apart*. The pain of something old falling apart--chaos—invites the soul to listen at a deeper level. It invites, and sometimes forces, the soul to go to a new place because the old place is falling apart. Most of us would never go to new places in any other way.¹

There is no way around the fact that suffering is part of human existence, be it yours or mine. We all suffer in various ways. One way of dealing with suffering is to say that we will not let it be a part of our lives, a bit like Peter when he denied that Jesus needed to suffer. It is something like the Prosperity Gospel—just have enough faith and everything will be fine. If you

¹ Richard Rohr, *The Wisdom Pattern: Order, Chaos, Reorder*. pp 69, 70.

have faith in Jesus, you will have all the money you need. You will be healthy. You will rise in influence in the world. Jesus is your guarantor. All things will be well with you. But when you find yourself not healthy, wealthy, and wise, it has to be because you just don't believe sufficiently. There must be something wrong with you. You must be sinning, or this wouldn't be happening. That was the argument of Job's friends.

Another approach to suffering can be the casual one that James and John took when Jesus challenged them. "Can you drink the cup that I must drink or be baptized with the baptism that I must endure?" Their response, as recorded in the Message Bible, was "Sure, why not?" It will just be a passing moment, and everything will go back to normal. Sure, why not? As Jesus noted, they would share his sufferings, but it wasn't going to be temporary or transitory. After Stephen, James would become the second martyr of the church by being beheaded, as recorded in Acts 12. John would be imprisoned on the island of Patmos, no one knows for how long, but that imprisonment gave rise to one of the most comprehensive visions that one could possibly imagine, a vision that spanned the eternities.

James and John each learned the one salient, indisputable truth—life holds suffering for everyone, no matter who they may be. Even apostles suffer along with all the rest of us. But that wasn't the end of their story. For each, their suffering for and with Jesus led to the beginning of a worldwide church, and the imprisonment on Patmos for John gave us the Book of Revelation, in which, despite all the opposition it shows, Jesus is always the victor. What we are going to explore is how his victory can be with us in the midst of our struggles. How can the living Christ be a vibrant part of our lives?

Those of us who live in the western world probably see less suffering than do many people living in other parts of the globe. Many suffer from the lack of the basics of life. They have no idea where their next meal will come from. They live in shanties or under a piece of plastic sheeting. Their only water comes from, with luck, a well in the town square. Otherwise, they have to find it in a nearby river, or pond, or puddle, and the chance that it has disease bearing bacteria is high. Many of them suffer from diseases that have been eradicated here—malaria, measles, mumps, chicken pox—and some die from them. Life is pain and suffering for a large portion of the human family, and yet the loving presence of God is with them, and in the midst of pain and squalor, they can still find some joy in life.

I will never forget a daddy/daughter date that Marta and I took to India, so that I could do some research. We were in a hotel in Delhi, and I looked out the window. Next to the hotel was a railroad track, and on the margin of it was a polyethylene sheet, propped up on two sticks. It was the home of a small family—a father, a mother, and a couple of children. In front of the shelter was a cooking fire with a pot hanging over it—and that was absolutely everything they had. As I watched them, I was amazed, for they laughed and played with each other, enjoying everything despite what life had given them. There was no way to deny that God was clearly present in the midst of their lives. Then I thought of my students back home—or perhaps some of us—who, in the midst of all our plenty, are simply bored. Who are the great

and noble souls—those along the railroad tracks in India or we with everything we have, who are dissatisfied?

There is really no end to the number of ways that suffering can enter our lives. We can suffer mentally, physically, or spiritually. Children can hurt themselves, break arms and legs, get the flu, or even suffer cancer. Adolescents can be bullied, blocked from Facebook accounts, mocked, shunned by one-time friends, and neglected by parents. Adults can lose a job, can face the death of a parent or a child, can struggle with depression or suicidal thoughts, or can face divorce and separation from a spouse or children. In the face of all these winds of woe, doubts about our faith can arise. We may come to doubt that there is a God or at least doubt that he cares at all about us.

When we feel this way, however, the high probability is that we are not living in a vibrant relationship with God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We are trying to go it alone. We are too much like the man who was living in the midst of a flood and praying for God to save him, as he sat on the roof of his flooded house. His neighbor came by in an inflatable raft, and offered to get him out, but he thanked him and said God would take care of him. The same thing happened when a police-launch and then a helicopter came by. In the end, he drowned, and when he got to heaven and asked Jesus why he hadn't helped him, Jesus' response was, "What more did you want? I sent you an inflatable raft, a police -launch, and a helicopter." All too often, Jesus is right there with us but we don't recognize his closeness.

It is important that we recognize that faith is not a collection of doctrines or theologies. It is not head stuff. It is a living relationship in which Jesus invites us into the divine life of the members of the Godhead. Richard Rohr wrote a book called *The Divine Dance*, which is about the Trinity. Within that inner-Trinitarian life is a joyous waltz of love, and with the gift of faith, we are invited to join it. That love bridged the gap between us and the members of the Godhead when we were embraced by Jesus and he gave us faith. We need to find him, not in mind, but in a real relationship.

I saw a painting the other day of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. It pictures his agony in the garden. But the scriptures also tell us that an angel came and comforted him. That is the picture I saw in which Jesus was sitting on the ground in agony, and this glorious being was sitting with him with his arms wrapped around him. When we are in agony, that is exactly what Jesus does to us—wraps his arms around us in love, the same love that he showed us when he went to cross for us.

The Holy Spirit bears witness to each of us of that love. You can really touch it and feel it. When my wife, Flo Beth, was putting our son, Evan, on a plane for Marine boot camp at Camp Pendleton, she held it all together as she waved him off, but when she reached the parking lot, she lost it for a moment. But then she put him in God's hands, and an incredible peace swept over her from her head to her feet. That peace has remained, and it is especially meaningful even today as he serves as a police officer. We can literally feel Jesus' presence with us through the Holy Spirit. That is the relationship of faith and love.

To quote from the Man of La Mancha, “he was willing to walk into hell for a heavenly cause”! There is really no greater love than that. But how do I find him and his love? From my life experience, I find him first in the scriptures, and for me the most meaningful translation of the Bible is the Message Version. It makes him and all the other characters and writings of the Bible real and vibrant, and I can connect with them. Then there is prayer. That is a relationship, not a one-way street. I share my feelings, my real feelings of hurt and pain or of thanksgiving, and then I stop to listen. And he does speak. Sometimes through other people, but more often than not through that quiet voice of the Holy Spirit that assures me I am loved and that Jesus and the Father are with me.

Another thing that I like to do is go for a walk in God’s incredibly beautiful world. Everything I see has the fingerprints of the Savior upon them, for he was their creator. I like to walk on the path just down from the church, and I feel Christ all around me. I see him in the golden rod. I see him in the red, yellow, and orange leaves. I see him in the squirrels and chipmunks who scamper by. I see him in the various birds that greet me along the way. A couple of days ago, a little nuthatch came down to talk with me for a couple of minutes, and I could see God’s love for me in that beautiful little creature. To top it off, three young deer settled down in our backyard, under the crabapple tree, and must have stayed there for 45 minutes to an hour just chewing their cud. Christ was definitely there in their midst. I am not alone in this world, and when the day comes that things are dark and closing in around me, I will come back to these experiences and relive them, letting Christ once again assure me that he is with me, as well as turning to him in prayer.

There are times when we don’t see Jesus all around us, but then we need to remember a powerful poem about the woman who had deep faith in the Lord, and walked with him, hand in hand. But then a hard time came, and she couldn’t find him. She then had a dream, in which she saw two sets of footprints walking along a beach, and then there was only one set. In the dream she asked Jesus why he had left her when things got so hard for her, as the footprints indicated? With great love, he told her he had not left her, but that the one set of footprints was his as he carried her.

Having done what he did at the cross, Jesus can love us in a way no one else can. He did not just pay some bribe that a heartless God demanded. It was not a ransom paid to get us out of prison. It was an absolutely pure act of love that bridges the gap that we have created between ourselves and our loving God. In that act, sealed by the resurrection, he invites all persons into the Divine Dance, regardless of who we are or where we are on our path in life. He invites us to come to him, so that he may cleanse and purify us. But he will not force us. He invites us to take his hand and walk with him in the midst of this life which is often messy and painful, walk to our own new life. He invites us all into the divine dance.

I danced in the morning
When the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon
And the stars and the sun,
And I came down from heaven

And I danced on the earth,
At Bethlehem
I had my birth.

Dance, then, wherever you may be,
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he.

“Will I suffer, too?” The answer is an unequivocal, yes—but you and I are never asked to do it alone, because the King of the universe has gone before us, and done it for us, and will do it with us, out of an incomprehensible love for us all. We are all invited to the Divine Dance.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.