

Matthew 16:21-28 Bill Uetricht 14 Pentecost 8.31.23

There is no more challenging subject for people of faith and for those who do not see themselves as people of faith than the subject of suffering. If God is good and supposedly in control, why is there is so much suffering? Why do little babies die? Who do innocent Ukrainian people suffer at the hands of the brutal Russian government? Why does it seem that the good folks endure so much pain, while the evil ones get away with so much? People of every generation ask these good questions, questions rooted in real experience. As the hymn writer says, "Sometimes our only song is weeping."

If you thought that I was going to answer all these questions in today's sermon, you're badly mistaken. Providing an adequate response to these questions is way beyond my pay grade. The kind of suffering that some people go through cannot be sufficiently explained. Human suffering is in many ways a huge enigma, a mystery that evades easy answers. I am not going to go down the easy-answer path, but I do want to wade in the waters of the subject, particularly as it relates to our theme for today, "Must Suffer?"

Matthew tells us that Jesus *begins* (this is only the start of his work with his close friends) to show his disciples that he *must* go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes and be killed." His calling involves a suffering that is a matter of "must", divine necessity, we might say.

What do we make of that must-ness? But before I respond to that, there is other work that we need to *begin*. The first thing that I want to say, at least on the basis of the Biblical witness that we get today, is that suffering is very real. It's not an illusion as some religious traditions suggest. It's not something that we can get rid of with a simple attitude adjustment, with a commitment to positive thinking. A very real part of the Biblical witness is what is called "lament." Biblical characters, when

they are going through suffering, often lament. Jeremiah, in our first reading, is lamenting. He, often referred to as the “suffering prophet,” is the king of lamenters. It’s interesting that last week when Peter was asked who Jesus is, his response includes a reference to Jeremiah. Some folks say you are Jeremiah. Like Jeremiah, you suffer a lot. Maybe even, like Jeremiah, you lament a lot.

Jeremiah is lamenting today. He is lamenting about his call to be a prophet. And he is brutally honest as he does so. “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.” Jeremiah is accusing God of lying to him, of taking him down a path that he would have rather not gone.

There is no sugarcoating suffering here. There’s no attempt to claim that it isn’t real. You don’t need to hide your suffering. You don’t need to pretend that it’s all good when it isn’t. (Sometimes when people say these days, “It’s all good,” that is what they are doing. They are pretending.) Suffering is real, and sometimes the right response is to lament, to complain. You are not served by your friends who tell you just to get over it, to realize that the “sun will come out tomorrow.” You don’t need to sing with Annie, “Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love you, tomorrow. It’s only a day away.” The sun may come out tomorrow. I don’t know. But tomorrow may include a giant thunderstorm with tornadic winds. Who knows for sure? Suffering is real, and generally we are not served by denying it, pretending that it doesn’t affect us. We’re given permission to lament.

Oh yes, some people get lost there. You might wonder whether Jeremiah was one of those *some people*. Some people are like one of my favorite characters, Eeyore from **Winnie the Pooh**: “Oh, it’s all bad. It’s only going to get worse.” We’re not served by a life that cannot be discovered by the giftedness of all things, by that which brings

gratitude. But we are also not served by denying reality, by refusing to lament. We can take it. God can handle it.

Does that mean that we are supposed to suffer, that suffering is what God wants for us, that suffering is God's plan for us? You know, we suffer a bit so that we can learn a lesson, so that we build character. Now I will agree that suffering does teach us a lot, that the result of suffering can indeed, as Paul says, be endurance and endurance can help create character. But is God, in wherever God's little world is, dishing out suffering to us *so that* we become better people. Is our suffering God's way of keeping us humble? I don't buy that. While the Bible grapples with this subject and reaches different conclusions about it, I find the notion of God being the divine spreader of suffering fertilizer on us as unhelpful, or more pointedly, deplorable. Cancer is God's punishment of you for something you shouldn't have done. You lost your child because God wanted to teach you how precious life is. Yuk! If that is the kind of God we worship, I think I want to run from this God; I want to stop this work as a pastor that I am doing. The-God-is-a-sadist theology is miserable to me.

Yes, suffering is real. It happens. And in that way, I can say that there is a must-ness to it. If you are human, you *must* suffer. It's just the way life works. Humans suffer. But I want to say more than that. From my reading, when the Bible talks about the must-ness of suffering it often does so from the vantage point of the present looking at the past. It's a way of dealing with the past, of figuring it out, of making some sense out of it.

I hear the early church talking in Matthew's gospel when we read about the must-ness of Jesus' suffering. I am certain that one of the hardest things for the early church to figure out is why Jesus suffered, why he was crucified. Why was such a good man given such a horrible fate? It was an enigma that the church probably couldn't figure out.

And so, the church grappled to make sense of what doesn't make any sense. And sometimes there was an awkwardness to that grappling, an awkwardness that affected much of church history. The early church spoke of Jesus *having* to suffer, as if his suffering was God's plan all along. The picture is of a God sending his son to the earth at some point in history, with the intention that the son must die--for the sake of the sins of the world, some folks concluded. Jesus' life and death were all mapped out. Judas was a pawn in the whole scheme. Jesus had to die, one way or another.

Well, I think that was an unfortunate road for the church to go down. It removed the mystery of life and suffering and eliminated the freedom that comes with being human. Perhaps the story could have ended differently. Perhaps our story could end differently.

Sadly from my perspective, the path that some of the church went down caused many to conclude that suffering is *our* divine necessity. Whatever happens is all a part of God's plan for us. Ugh! I will not buy that my mother-in-law's Huntington's Disease was God's plan for our family. I will not buy that the death of six million Jews in the Holocaust was a part of God's plan for the world.

All right! You get it. "He must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering" is part of the way we make sense out of the past. But is that all? Is there more to share about the must-ness of Jesus' suffering and the invitation for us to suffer as well, to take up the cross and follow Jesus?

I think there is more. I think Jesus *had* to suffer. And we *must*, too. Why? Because that is where love takes us. That's where love took Jesus. Love suffers. If you are a parent, you realize this. If you are a caretaker of a frail mother or father or spouse, you understand this. Love leads to suffering. Love must suffer. If you love, you are going to suffer. You are going to get your heart broken. And very often, and this is where I think

Jesus is going in our gospel reading, you are going to have to endure getting over yourself. And some of the greatest suffering in the world is that which comes from dying to yourself.

“And Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’” It all starts with a gracious and loving invitation. “Come follow me.” Come participate in this movement of love. But love sometimes will require the denial of the self. And that denial will lead to suffering, the cross.

If we participate in the great movement of love, we *must* suffer. We will have to come to grips with the fact that life won’t be all about us. It won’t be about all of our acquisitions, all of our money, all of our achievements, all of our attempts to become popular, to have a high standing in the polls. Like Jeremiah, we will have to deal with the fact that some people won’t get us, will reject us, will wonder why we don’t try to keep up with the Jones’, why we give people a second chance, why we forgive people, why we are generous with our time and our money. Love will complicate our lives. And sometimes love will feel like suffering and death. “Those who want to save their life will lose it.”

But the promise is that there is no greater life than the life of love. Protecting the self, making life all about money and stuff, seeking a life that is simply about people’s approval, avoiding the pain of the world—these won’t give us the life we really want and that God intends for us. “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Life lived in love, while painful sometimes, is indeed the full life.

Must suffer? Jesus did because love took him there. We also will suffer when love leads our way. But remember this: crucifixion was not the final word for Jesus. God raised him from death. Resurrection ruled. Must suffer? Yes! Must be raised with Jesus? That’s the promise!