

Is There Any Gain without Suffering? Romans 5: 1-5

It was an unexpected response. At the beginning of this summer, I invited this congregation to participate with me in an "Ask Jack" sermon series. You submitted questions and suggested topics and, to my surprise, there were several questions on the subject of suffering. As a result, this is the first in a three-part series on the reality, nature, and purpose of suffering for us as Christians.

Today's sermon considers the role and purpose of suffering for us as individuals and as believers. Next Sunday, I'll focus on our response to the suffering around us, both as individuals and as church, with the question: "Is charity enough?" Then, in two weeks, we will examine the mission of the church from the perspective of a theology of liberation in response to suffering in world. This suffering sermon series is not intended for you to suffer in hearing it!

Today, we are honoring A. J. Reid who has blessed us these past three years with his musical gifts. This is a poem called *The Musician* about the famous violinist Fritz Kreisler. I thought of A. J. immediately and offer it to him.

A memory of Kreisler once:

At some recital in this same city,
The seats all taken, I found myself pushed
On to the stage with a few others,
So near that I could see the toil of his face muscles,
A pulse like a moth fluttering under the fine skin
and the indelible veins of his smooth brow.
I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,
Caught temporarily in art's neurosis,
As we sat there or warmly applauded
This player who so beautifully suffered for each of us upon his instrument.
So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm
Making such music as lives still.
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.

(R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems, 1945-1990*, Dent, 1993)

The Apostle Paul writes to the Roman Christians anticipating his trip there. It would be for him a different sort of missionary trip. He would travel in chains, as a prisoner, to stand trial before Caesar. In this letter of introduction to the Roman Christians, Paul shares his vision of the deeper reality of the life they and he were actually living - a life not preoccupied with the fear of pain and suffering or

persecution, or of confusion. He tells them, in essence, to take a deep breath and chill. He invites them to consider again the life they are living and their faith. This is taken from *The Message* translation.

“By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us--set us right, make us fit --we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus.” Paul tells them there is actually good news in all their suffering!

“And that's not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us.” Paul is telling them that this is the reality he confessed and that they need to confess it too.

“We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand” AND “There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged.”

Again, Paul says that there's a lot of good to come from the suffering you're experiencing. He's implying that he should know because no one suffers more than Paul! “Quite the contrary--we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!”

I'm going to use an unusual exegetical source for interpreting the Christian New Testament – that is, a Buddhist understanding of the nature of suffering in our lives. Buddhism teaches “All is suffering.” There is the experience of suffering itself, the cessation of suffering, and the pathway to a cessation of suffering.

Buddhism teaches that there are three aspects of suffering. First, there is physical or emotional suffering. For example, in a relationship there can be emotional pain as the result of harsh criticism by a partner, or the withdrawal of the other person from the relationship.

There is also suffering due to changes in a relationship. For example, a child grows up and leaves home. An elderly parent or partner dies. Because we love, we suffer.

Third, there is suffering due to the natural and healthy development of a relationship. For example, parents may have the expectation of a child to fulfill our dreams. Then, the child discovers her own dreams. Change in the shape of a relationship brings suffering.

For Buddhist & Christian alike, suffering seems inevitable. In a church such as this one, suffering results from the interactions of people. There are hurt feelings. Sometimes you find yourself feeling unappreciated or feeling excluded.

There is suffering resulting from changes in your experiences of worship and changes in the styles of teaching and the focus of sermons. Suffering results from people leaving and from new people entering.

There is suffering resulting from changes of location. This congregation has met in several different places in its brief life and is now in the process buying a church house. Suffering results from people growing and experiencing changes in their

theological understanding -- people growing up; people growing old. Suffering results when we find the church becoming something different than we expected.

Paul tells the Romans that suffering is part of life. It can help us grow. It can strengthen our resolve. It can build patience and it can lead to hope.

We can agree that some suffering in life, today as well, seems unavoidable. We can make the best of it. Good can come from it.

There are some bigger questions. "Why suffering at all?" Is it good to suffer? "No, I don't believe it is intrinsically good to suffer."

"Does God want us to suffer?" a. I don't think so. Some suggest that suffering is the result of sin. It is true that much suffering in the world is the result of human evil. World hunger, for example, is almost entirely the result of war. Some suffering, however, just comes with being alive. If God doesn't want us to suffer, it is apparent to me that God wants us to grow. Life compels growth and, when growth stops, we are dead.

So, is there any gain without suffering? I think so, depending on what kind of "gain" you mean. Wealth or knowledge gained as the result of hard work and struggle, and reflection on that struggle, may enrich us more than wealth or knowledge given without the struggle. It may bring wisdom. The gain one receives seems to be connected intimately to the process by which it is gained. True enrichment may well come through the struggle itself and the confidence it brings.

Let's be clear. We can find blessing through dealing with suffering, but suffering itself is not a blessing. The reverse, however, is not necessarily true -- that the lack of suffering is a blessing. That's the problem for most us. A great deal is lost by the focused effort to avoid suffering.

We live in a culture that preaches avoiding suffering as a way of life. Work hard and buy things that will make us happy, that will occupy our minds and let us distance ourselves from unpleasantness. We try to insulate ourselves from harsh realities such as poverty, mental illness, and crime.

The things and the money do not create the problem. It is, rather, our attachment to them -- using them to avoid suffering in world and to avoid our own pain -- using mind-numbing substances; using mind-numbing entertainment; using a mind-numbing pace of life. We find ourselves doing so many things to convince ourselves we are really living in a desire to protect ourselves from suffering.

Such an attitude colors much of the way we live life even in church. We distance ourselves from those who make us uncomfortable -- who remind us that not everyone has a home. Not everyone comes from a loving family. Not everyone has a job.

The attitude colors our theology as well. We think of heaven as a place of no suffering. Hell is a place where there is only suffering. But the impact of the gospel is to let our suffering open us to see the suffering of others. It is to let the suffering of others draw compassion from us. It is to imitate the way of Jesus.

"Please stop, please," the poet says. "Silence!

Listen to the beating of your heart

Listen to the blowing of the wind

The movement of the Spirit.
Be silent – said the Lord –
And know that I am God.
And listen to the cry of the voiceless.
Listen to the groaning of the hungry.
Listen to the pain of the landless.
Listen to the sigh of the oppressed,
And to the laughter of the children” (from *Celebrating One World*)

What about the fantasy? If you were God, surely life would not be full of suffering! Yet, without suffering, what would we lose? maybe we would never hear “the groaning of the hungry,” the pain of the landless, the sigh of the oppressed” or “the laughter of the children”. Somehow God, who is God, provides a world in which suffering happens and it’s what we do with it that counts.

What about suffering in your life? You can seek suffering. We call that being a martyr. You find yourself looking for sympathy -- looking for something. You complain. You criticize. It fills life as a substitute for intimacy. This can become habitual behavior and it drives people away. It inhibits your own growth. You get stuck and there is more suffering.

You can try to avoid suffering at all costs. Our culture offers many choices: money, power, drugs, fantasy, suicide. The lure is that you can and should avoid suffering at any cost. Do these work? No, at least not for long and not in any real depth.

You can endure suffering stoically. As a result, you shut down your feelings except anger and bitterness. You lose hope. You expect the worst and you’re not disappointed. You become the anger and the bitterness. There is no hope and no joy.

Or, you can invite a certain suffering. You can choose to live in a way characterized by authenticity. You can live with integrity out of the vision that emerges from within the self, guided by your own giftedness and motivated by the Spirit’s invitation.

This way of living invites the suffering that comes naturally along that way. Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador chose to live this way. He once said, “How cruel people become when animated not by God’s Spirit, but by the spirit of getting ahead in the world”. He spoke out against an oppressive government, to the people and for the people. He was assassinated during mass in his church.

When you invite the suffering that comes as a result of living with integrity, the self grown from that experience of suffering, of ourselves and of others, is authentic self made by God. To live like this is to experience life like standing in a flowing river. It is always new. It is life always being renewed and reborn.

Elizabeth O’Connor articulated this life:

I have caught a vision of Christ’s new earth and have come to understand that it is every person’s vocation to create that earth. We are to cast out demons, be healers, artists, musicians, the builders of caring institutions.

Creativity is not the work of a few. We each carry within us the image of God the Creator; we each have the task of making the earth into a fairer kinder place.

The first step is imaging a better world, and that is most apt to happen when we suffer or look on suffering. The difficulty is that we do not take the next step of creating the world we envision. We lack the courage or somehow feel that this is someone else's responsibility rather than the work of the one who sees and images something different and higher. We are not powerless in the oppressive situations in which we feel caught. We are not bound to the reality we see. We are creators. We can make the new. (from *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)

Through the power of the Spirit, let us give birth to the new that God places within us, as we walk this journey together, and with God.