

Peace, Pain, and a Path Forward

Romans 5:1-5

Memorial Day is a United States Federal holiday. Originally it was Decoration Day and observed to commemorate U.S. men and women who died while in military service. Originally the holiday was marked after the Civil war to remember and honor those who gave their lives in that conflict.

The paradox of seeking to bring about peace through war is part of the tension that Memorial Day observance brings to us. In that tension, we can honor the heroism of military service in time of war for the ideal of peace. And regardless of how any of us views the decision to go to war, and even the framework that leads to and justifies war or what motivations lie behind using the military, I hope we can all salute that spirit of service and heroism today.

Peace is an ideal we hold up, but I think it is a quest for safety more than a desire for true peace that has tended to lead our nation into war, especially in recent times. If this is true, then it certainly reflects much of my experience with individuals. Our choices, and any efforts that use coercion and even violence, tend to aim at a sense of safety or security more than at making peace. There is a hard question to ask ourselves as individuals and as a society, “is it more about being safe or making peace? Honesty compels me to confess that I seek safety. I think we as a nation and as a congregation seek safety and hope it will give us peace.

What is peace? The Apostle Paul wrote the Roman Christians (and us) that peace is a gift from God. It comes from feeling confidence in God’s reality and trusting in God’s acceptance. As we trust that no harsh and condemning judge waits to punish us for not being good enough or not believing in as orthodox a way as we should, there is a sense of peace. As we trust that there is a divine presence that is powerful and loving, we find peace within. As we trust that the divine presence [God] lives in us and through us and connects to the divine presence in others, we find peace between people and with nature. That’s how Paul was able to write the Roman church, “Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.” (v.1-2)

Pain happens--suffering too! From a Christian perspective, good can come from the suffering you’re experiencing. Suffering seems inevitable, especially when people live and work with each other. There are always misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and feeling unappreciated and excluded. People leave. New people enter. Things change. Suffering is part of life and can help us grow. In fact, it might be essential for growth—to strengthen resolve, build patience, and lead to hope.

We can find blessing through dealing with suffering, but suffering itself is not a blessing. The reverse, however, is not necessarily true. It’s important to note that the lack of suffering is not necessarily a blessing. A great deal can be lost by the focused effort to avoid suffering. Our culture preaches, as a way of life, the avoidance of suffering to distance ourselves from unpleasantness and insulate ourselves from the harsh realities of poverty, shame, and death. But misery has a way of finding us eventually. Substitutes don’t work. Avoidance doesn’t last and doesn’t solve the underlying problems.

One path forward holds at least the potential of some suffering. We invite a certain suffering and pain by choosing to live in a way that is characterized by authenticity. To live with integrity, by a

vision that emerges from within the self, guided by our own giftedness, and motivated by the Spirit's invitation you invite the suffering that comes naturally along that way. Archbishop Oscar Romero once said,

A church that suffers no persecution, but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth—beware!—is not the true church of Jesus Christ. A preaching that does not point out sin is not the preaching of the gospel. A preaching that makes sinners feel good, so that they are secured in their sinful state, betrays the gospel's call. (from a sermon January 22, 1978)

Jesus chose to live open to the suffering of others. He chose not to avoid the pain that came as a result of living life with integrity. His suffering stands in judgment of our lives, of our reluctance to enter the crucible on behalf of the suffering people in our world. What, then, should we do to move forward on the journey of faith? This is not a difficult question to answer. It's just a difficult answer to *live*.

Charity is the usual response of churches and other caring people to suffering. Food pantries, clothes closets, soup kitchens, home repair, and emergency assistance address immediate needs and alleviate suffering. The suffering is a problem in itself and an immediate response to ease the suffering can be vital, but charity is not always enough. Suffering is also a symptom of a deeper problem and we can get stuck putting out fires, providing emergency aid, and dealing with symptoms and never address the root causes of suffering.

Addressing these root causes involves serious transformation. It means significant changes in ourselves and how we relate to others. A therapist friend of mine once told me that no one ever came to see him professionally because they wanted to grow. They came because they were in pain and wanted it to stop. Sadly, not many stayed around to work on growing once the pain was relieved.

Poverty might be a symptom of a national history of slavery and racial discrimination—one our society is largely not able to face and confess. Over reliance on military power might be a symptom a national fear that we are losing the economic power, influence, and status that we've enjoyed for decades—that we're feeling our position threatened. We are called to address the root causes of suffering and pain in our lives and also in our world. Solutions to the root cause of many of our problems include confession, restitution, and rebirth. They also include making changes in oppressive structures, policies, attitudes globally, nationally, locally, and personally.

Church is a place of refuge, a place we come for healing of wounds, to meet our need for community, friends, company, and guidance for the journey. But the path forward is not found by focusing on our suffering and getting our needs met. It is found in seeing the needs of others and in giving ourselves to address the suffering of others in ways that are effective, ways that reflect the values of Christ-like love. The path forward for each of us—the path forward for this congregation—is not just in embracing our own suffering and seeking our own healing, but in turning outward to see and address the pain and seek the healing of others in Jesus' name

As we celebrate this Memorial Day, let us remember and honor all those whose sacrifices have benefited us. Let us turn our vision toward the needs of those around us and those who follow us so that our sacrifices will benefit them— will redeem any suffering we experience, and will help transform not only ourselves, but the world we share through the love of God “that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Amen.