

WALKING WITH JESUS
5th Sunday of Lent
Healing Prayer and Communion
March 18, 2018
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Texts: Jeremiah 31.31-34;
 Psalm 51.1-12;
 Hebrews 5.5-12;
 John 12.20-33

I'm going to begin today with a "captain obvious" statement: I don't like suffering. As my daughter has taken to saying to me "well obvi!" Who does? In fact avoiding suffering is hard wired into us for good reason. We were made to enjoy a beautiful day, to treasure relational connection, to relish the accomplishment of good work, and to feel the joy of being alive in our bodies. We were made to feel a sense of communion and connection with the earth, with its creatures, with each other and with God. We were made to flourish; to be blessed and to be a blessing. Anything that interrupts that flow sounds off alarms in our circuitry, in our minds, in our soul.

Is it any wonder that over time human beings have tried to develop a calculus to stay in flow with flourishing and avoid suffering? We have in our own biblical tradition a strand of teaching that says "If you are faithful, God will bless you (and this was understood to be material blessing). If you are unfaithful, God will curse you." And people would run those equations in reverse. If you fell on hard times then clearly you must have done something to deserve it.

I say one strand of teaching because there is tension and dialogue within the scriptures about this. The prophets and wisdom literature, like the book of Job, push back against such simplistic accounting. And yet this flawed thinking persists to this day. Not just in the prosperity gospel within Evangelical Christianity but even in the protestant work ethic. That's our Calvinist roots that teaches that hard work leads to success and that success is a sign of your salvation.

The result of this persistent line of thinking is that even if we know better there is a voice in the back of our minds if not screaming directly in our ears that wonders what people did to bring on the suffering they are experiencing. That asks when we are suffering: “what did I do to deserve this?”

Friends, this is often a deadly question; the first step toward some shadowy places. Places that leave us scared and paralyzed spiraling toward shame or vengeful and agitated lashing out in blame. Neither of these places brings much healing. A whole lot of suffering in the world simply defies easy explanation. It isn't your fault. It isn't any one person's fault. It just IS.

There is, of course, a caveat here. And this is where it gets really complicated. I can trace my rising blood sugar levels when my weight goes up. You can trace the decision not to do your home work to the bad grade you received. As Gordon said last week, there are consequences to our actions. This is true for us corporately and not just personally. We can trace the racial tensions of our nation to the way this country was founded; to the laws enacted by people who told themselves they were white. These laws from those days to this very day are designed to keep wealth and resources in the hands of the ruling class.

We have this way pushing suffering to the margins (especially the suffering of others but even sometimes our own) thinking that if we don't have to see it or speak of it, we don't have to deal with it. Sometimes it's because we don't want to do the hard work of change. Other times it is because it scares us. Especially the kind of suffering that just IS. If it could happen to you, it could happen to me.

Like I said, “I don't like suffering.” Not just the suffering itself but trying to make sense of it. It can make your head spin. As we've been invited this Lent to walk with Jesus, I've been replaying the scriptures in my mind's eye watching for the way that Jesus entered into the suffering of the world. He does not play these games.

He seems to have a radar for human suffering. Where you and I might use such equipment to steer clear, Jesus used it as a homing device. To come

alongside people in their suffering and to help them in discerning where to turn and what to do. Sometimes it was to raise the eyebrow and offer the stern corrective, but even then it was an offering of love. Just before Jesus calls out the rich young Mark tells us “Jesus, looking at him, loved him...”¹ What is said explicitly in this story is felt implicitly in every other confrontation he ever has.

The real fierceness of Jesus’ love is felt when he embraces the ones who cannot look him in the eye; the ones who do not feel as if they have a place at the table. They are the ones he scans the room to find – the ones he seeks out – the ones he lifts up.

This is the real heart of our text today; this language of when Jesus is lifted up (using that phrase in a very different way now) he will draw all people to him. He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.²

When people started coming from far and wide, from the Greeks as well as the Jews, Jesus could feel the coalitions forming against him. He had a choice to make: Would he stay the course? Would he now embody what he had proclaimed? Would he bless those who cursed him and forgive his enemies? Or would he give in to the urge to retaliate violence for violence to save his life? Would he hold the truth of his belovedness proclaimed at his baptism like a cloak of protection around his heart when people reviled him and turned on him and desecrated his body? Or would he believe their taunting that triumph equals glory? That suffering is a sign of weakness and weakness signals failure? Would the suffering they had in store for him pull him apart? Sever his communion with God? Disrupt his sense of purpose? Rupture his sense of his own belovedness and send him into those spirals of shame and blame?

It troubled his soul to anticipate what was to come. But he also recognized the fallacy of their logic. He knew from the wisdom embedded in creation that death was not the end: “I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat

¹ Mark 10.21, NRSV

² John 12. 32-33, NRSV.

falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”³

When Jesus dies on the cross – when he enters into the suffering that people have endured before him and continue to endure to this day – he reveals the glory of God. We were made to flourish. There are so many things that pull us from that flourishing. Sometimes we trace where that disruption came from and sometimes we can't. No matter what the cause and no matter who's to blame, nothing can sever our communion with God. Even, if for a time, it feels like it has.

Friends, this bread, this cup, this oil are here as physical sign and seal of all that we are invited to remember this day. That you are not alone. That one has gone before you and knows from the inside what it is to suffer and what it is to have your heart break for the suffering of the world.

The Spirit of this One is scanning the room for you to look you in the eye and to lift you up.

So come to the table.

Come as you are.

Come seeking what you need.

And trust that God will meet you here.

Amen.

³ John 12. 24, NRSV.