

Sermon 100817 Suffering
Scripture 1Peter 4: 12-19
Sermon Title Let Go Let God

I have a lifelong friend named Michael Teasdale. Michael lives in CA now with his wife and college student son. He has had a fascinating life, much of it spent in Paris and other European venues. He is retired now after a successful career in business.

Michael is an intellectual and a lifetime learner. We are taking a course together in the Great Courses called “The Great Minds of the Western Intellectual Tradition.” We listen to a lecture on line and have a phone call to discuss the lecture. Michael is a great conversationalist. After we talk about what is going on in our lives, politics, and the NE Patriots, we get around to discussing the lecture. It’s a great way for us to keep in touch and feed our desire to keep learning.

Michael is very active in his UUA church and even serves on some national boards for them. He told me that he is taking a course in Buddhism. He shared with me something that the teacher said that struck him and it struck me as well.

The teacher made a distinction between pain and suffering. She used an example of a stubbed toe. Let’s say you get out of bed in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, which is a topic I know a lot about. Let’s say you stub your toe on a shoe that is on your path. You

experience pain. Then you realize that the shoe belongs to your loved-one.

You think of how you have asked your loved-one not to put shoes there more than once. You think that you are not listened to or that you are not loved enough by your loved-one to get him or her to change the behavior. You start feeling alienated. That is the suffering part. Michael's teacher said that suffering is the stories that we put around our pain. To me, that's a profound idea so let's think about suffering this morning and hopefully unpack it a little.

Let me start by being clear here. A lot of suffering is not putting stories around pain like stubbing a toe. Suffering can be great and real. It can come from human cruelty, natural disasters, poverty, and a myriad of other ways. I do not diminish that in any way. Those terrible things have always been part of the human condition and are still very much here today. The stubbed toe metaphor and the suffering being the stories we put around pain are self-inflicted, which is in one category.

Let me give you a real-life example of this. When I was back at West Church in Taunton, I did a funeral of a young man who committed suicide. His brother was at the funeral. The brother liked what I said and did and has come to later worship service on Christmas Eve. He did

it when I was at West Church and he has followed me here. I only see him once a year. He's a nice guy albeit quite disheveled.

Last Christmas Eve he, as usual, showed up early so I get a chance to visit with him. He told me that he tried to get his girlfriend to come but she is mad at God and wouldn't come. I said, what was it, she had a loved one die unexpectedly or she has a bad illness, something like that. He told me that she is in a wheelchair. She is mad at God because in her mind either God did that to her or God let that happen to her. I told him that I'd like to have a conversation with her because I don't believe in a God that would do that to her. I gave him my card, but of course, she never called. She sadly, is cut off from God. Suffering is the stories we put around our pain.

One unfortunate aspect of the human condition is our tendency to make ourselves out to be victims. That is at play in the stubbed toe metaphor... feeling uncared-for by a loved-one. It is at play in being mad at God because you have to live in a wheelchair. It may in fact be true that a spouse is not as caring as they could be. But it could be just that old habits are hard to break. When we immediately go to victimhood is when we impose suffering on ourselves.

The truth is that each and every one of us experiences pain and misfortune in our lives. The question is how do we react to it when it

does happen. Do we immediately assess blame and make ourselves out to be victims? What alternatives are there?

On 'the loved-one doesn't pay enough attention to me' thing, maybe it's time to pay more attention to your loved-one. If you give more attention to your loved-one, your loved-one just might pay more attention to you.

Suffering is the stories we put around our pain. What is happening when we do that is that we are finding someone else to blame for our pain. I don't know why we are so prone to do that, but I do know that it is unhealthy. We can be less ready to blame others and more ready to find ways of being better people. People who don't point fingers are emotionally and spiritually healthy than those who do.

I want to go back to something I said earlier in this message. I am talking this morning about self-inflicted suffering. This in no way diminishes the real suffering that people experience. Ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, horrible mass shootings, victims of hurricanes and earthquakes, poverty to name a few.

You've probably heard me talk about this too much, but God is not to blame when bad things happen to good people. God, for example, did not send the terrible hurricanes and earthquakes that hit our country and our Mexican neighbors. I don't know about you, but I

prayed a great deal around the time of those disasters. God is there to be turned to in difficult times.

Suffering is the stories we put around our pain. Maybe it is time to let go of self- inflicted suffering and let God help us through our pain.

AMEN