

From the Pulpit of Trinitarian Congregational Church...

October 25, 2015

Rev. Julie Olmsted

Sermon on Mark 10: 46-52

Suffering as a Gateway

“We’ll See”

Once upon a time, there was a farmer in the central region of China. He didn't have a lot of money and, instead of a tractor, he used an old horse to plow his field.

One afternoon, while working in the field, the horse dropped dead. Everyone in the village said, "Oh, what a horrible thing to happen." The farmer said simply, "We'll see." He was so at peace and so calm, that everyone in the village got together and, admiring his attitude, gave him a new horse as a gift.

Everyone's reaction now was, "What a lucky man." And the farmer said, "We'll see."

A couple days later, the new horse jumped a fence and ran away. Everyone in the village shook their heads and said, "What a poor fellow!"

The farmer smiled and said, "We'll see."

Eventually, the horse found his way home, and everyone again said, "What a fortunate man."

The farmer said, "We'll see."

Later in the year, the farmer's young boy went out riding on the horse and fell and broke his leg. Everyone in the village said, "What a shame for the poor boy."

The farmer said, "We'll see."

Two days later, the army came into the village to draft new recruits. When they saw

that the farmer's son had a broken leg, they decided not to recruit him.

Everyone said, "What a fortunate young man."

The farmer smiled again - and said "We'll see."

By no means do I claim to be able to uncover the absolute truth about suffering today. Neither do I think that we together could plumb the depths of the questions that have plagued humankind since the beginning of recorded history. Let's just take a look at some ideas about suffering and see what new light we might shed. Let's see if there is any point to it. Let's investigate an idea of suffering being a gateway to something important.

Everyone suffers. Everyone, at some time or another, finds himself in circumstances that are uncomfortable at best, and unbearable at worst. It doesn't matter your socio-economical status. It doesn't matter your education or background. Suffering is a part of life. To live is to risk suffering. To love is risk suffering. We all love to be comfortable. But, sooner or later, like the farmer in the story above, we will have circumstances that some (if not all) our peers will consider "very unfortunate."

We all receive blessing. We all will suffer, hurt, or feel bad at sometime in our lives. The man in the story seemed to have great equanimity about it all. How can you and I learn from the man in our scripture reading? How do you and I approach suffering and is there a way to do it that accesses something worthwhile, even good? Can it be that suffering can be transformed into a gateway of some kind, a doorway to something desirable in itself? Let's look.

Consider the following ideas to see if you can find a way to approach suffering in your own life that leaves you feeling not powerless, victimized and alone, but powerful, peaceful and connected to God and your community.

1. To suffer without sharing is hell. Notice the man in our scripture. He did not hold back in his need for relief. He did not suffer in silence. He called out. He acknowledged the truth of his suffering in the presence of his community. There are many who think and therefore behave as if suffering is something shameful. In Matthew Jesus is asked, "Is this man blind because he sinned or his parents sinned?" Jesus answered, "He is blind to reveal the glory of God." Here in our church family, to acknowledge need is to be human. It is also the opportunity to have others fulfill their purpose and their calling in life: to relieve suffering. When you call out to those who know you and love you and do not judge you, you give others a chance to serve, which puts to use their very reason for being.

2. When you are not suffering, it serves you to notice who is suffering and to respond to the call to serve others. The wheel of life allows for all of us to suffer at times, and all of us to serve at other times. Call it a dance. No one is without suffering, and no one is without blessing. It goes around and comes around. The attitude of gratitude is always called for, whether in times of blessing or suffering. Paul stated this in (1 Thess. 5:16-18). "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

3. Your claimed identity determines how you will suffer. Are you a poor sucker who just got the short end of the stick in life? Or are you a child of God? Are you someone who missed out when they passed out tickets for the good life? Or are you the Good News of God's love and redemption? This isn't just words. This is a place to stand in life. Who we consider ourselves to be (in the face of daunting and very difficult circumstances sometimes) will determine how we handle suffer, and oftentimes how long we suffer. Even in our suffering we can bring glory to God. Even in our suffering we can find peace and joy.

People can get stuck with suffering for a very long time. The willingness to "jump up and get healing" is demonstrated by the man in our scripture. The man did not pretend he was not suffering. The man did not "suck it up." The man called out, acknowledged the reality of his suffering. Then he went to get his healing. He knew that leaning forward and taking action and reaching out were critical to his healing. He also did not stay stuck for years just moaning and groaning. He was "pro-active" in his commitment to be healed.

His suffering was a gateway to his healing. His suffering, even more than that, was a gateway to his salvation.

You and I will suffer. You and I can relieve suffering in this life. Many older people believe that when they can no longer do service they are no longer useful. This couldn't be farther from the truth. Older people who have lost the ability to be active can relieve suffering with their love and blessing and being. Those who suffer can be a blessing by allowing others to serve them. The trick is to become adept at switching roles. We can't stay stuck and know the freedom and salvation of God's love and mercy.

We are the body of Christ. This is to say that there is only one of us here. Part of us may be suffering while the rest of us minister to those who are suffering. We can suffer without the drama. We can hurt and be open to healing. Together we can fulfill the dream of God's realm, through the acceptance of our lives and the commitment to

heal ourselves and the world...together.

Once upon a time, there was a farmer in the central region of China. He didn't have a lot of money and, instead of a tractor, he used an old horse to plow his field.

One afternoon, while working in the field, the horse dropped dead. Everyone in the village said, "Oh, what a horrible thing to happen." The farmer said simply, "We'll see." He was so at peace and so calm, that everyone in the village got together and, admiring his attitude, gave him a new horse as a gift.

Everyone's reaction now was, "What a lucky man." And the farmer said, "We'll see."

A couple days later, the new horse jumped a fence and ran away. Everyone in the village shook their heads and said, "What a poor fellow!"

The farmer smiled and said, "We'll see."

Eventually, the horse found his way home, and everyone again said, "What a fortunate man."

The farmer said, "We'll see."

Later in the year, the farmer's young boy went out riding on the horse and fell and broke his leg. Everyone in the village said, "What a shame for the poor boy."

The farmer said, "We'll see."

Two days later, the army came into the village to draft new recruits. When they saw that the farmer's son had a broken leg, they decided not to recruit him.

Everyone said, "What a fortunate young man."

The farmer smiled again - and said "We'll see."

Moral of the story: There's no use in overreacting to the events and circumstances of our everyday lives. Many times what looks like a setback, may actually be a gift in disguise. And when our hearts are in the right place, all events and circumstances are gifts that we can learn valuable lessons from.

As Fra Giovanni once said: "Everything we call a trial, a sorrow, or a duty, believe me... the gift is there and the wonder of an overshadowing presence."