

Trinity Sunday
June 16, 2019
Northfield, MA

Scripture: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Romans 5:1-5

Almost everyone has experienced suffering. As a young child our first experience of suffering could have been a punishment meted out by Mom or Dad. We suffer through serious illness, whether our own or a loved one. We suffer in the wake of a death, whether it is a physical death of a loved one or a metaphorical death, such as losing a job which defined your identity. Suffering can come as the indignities related to aging. People also suffer in the aftermath of something done wrong, whether intentional or unintentional. And then, there are circumstances which cause suffering, such as poverty, racism, and oppression.

Suffering is part of our humanity. The first scripture reference to suffering is in Genesis 3 when Eve and Adam ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, thus reminding us that it was part of the human condition from the beginning of time. The Bible has many references to suffering from sin, whether it fell upon an individual or all of society. David's downfall was a consequence of raping Bathsheba and his hubris. The prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) warned the nation that it would suffer collectively if it persisted in perpetuating injustice, greed, and idolatry.

Yet, suffering is not a simple cause and effect as in sin begets suffering. Job's suffering was unwarranted or more accurately a consequence of a cosmic bet. Job was a man who was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1b) Though his friends offered explanations, they insisted that his suffering was retributive due to some sin he

committed, even if he was unaware of it. Job insistently denied wrongdoing and demanded an explanation from God. When it came, he got no real answer.

Scripture also treats suffering as a way to grow in our knowledge and faith in God.

Consider Deuteronomy 8:1-6:

This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him.

Jesus, however, presented a dilemma. His suffering was unwarranted. He was without sin. The authorities of power imposed his suffering through excruciating torture. Why does one inflict suffering upon God? And why would Jesus' suffering enable him to grow in his own faith?

Jesus' suffering shifted the rationale for suffering. Furthermore, Jesus followers were subjected to persecution, including torture. They suffered because they followed Jesus, which meant their suffering was unwarranted as well. There was no retribution or punishment due to sin.

Thus, suffering became something of an endurance. Resurrection would justify the suffering as God's justice would ultimately prevail over its injustice. Suffering would also transform the sufferer by improving their character and thus becoming a better person. Thus, as Jesus suffered for us, we suffer for others.

And while that might have been an appropriate reframing of suffering for the early Christians, it is hard to justify today.

How do we frame it today? How should we respond to suffering since it is part of the human condition.

While there is some truth to personal growth and transformation that can come from suffering, we may wonder why we're suffering in the first place, especially if we haven't done anything wrong. Implicitly, our immediate frame is a subtle nod to retribution couched in "helpful" adages. While our friends might not say, "You must have done something wrong," they might say: "God doesn't give you more than you can handle." or "This is part of God's plan for you." Or an unhelpful answer to someone whose child died, "God needed another angel." Glib answers like that might help if we see God as a cosmic puppeteer or a celestial clockmaker, but often the hearer might respond by silently swearing at God saying, "If that's God, I want nothing to do with Him."

Let's also dismiss the notion that our suffering will be justified when we die and go to heaven. True, I hear many people take solace believing that following a long and terrible illness their loved one is at peace. And I don't have a problem with it. However, I do have a problem when people dismiss those who are suffering from injustices saying that they will be rewarded in heaven.

Suffering has value when it is redemptive. The glib unhelpful phrases are a feeble way to offer a redemptive message for those who suffer. Redemption, however, requires us to dig deep, dig way down, sometimes even getting dirty. It's hard work, but necessary work.

We redeem suffering with wisdom. Wisdom, which the writer of Proverbs noted was present at the beginning of Creation, is not about being intellectual or smart. Wisdom is how we live and live so we can thrive. Wisdom comes with life experiences forged through accomplishments and failures.

Proverbs, a genre of scripture known as wisdom literature, frames life as a choice between two women, Wisdom and the harlot. Wisdom is the way of life. The harlot is the way of death. When we suffer we should seek to follow Lady Wisdom.

Lady Wisdom does not necessarily alleviate suffering. She will, however, help us to endure. She will most likely keep us from compounding our suffering. We can frame suffering as “what lessons about living do I gain?”

Certainly, suffering caused by sin should force us to reflect upon our actions and how they led to our predicament. Even with a sin of omission, though our sin was a mistake and therefore unintentional, what can we do to avoid making a similar mistake or taking a shortcut and compounding it? Suffering in grief could lead us to reframe our grief. I recently had a conversation with someone whose longtime significant other died. The business around death, closing bank accounts, canceling credit cards, transferring titles, is tedious and often a burden because it reminds us of who has died. She, however, saw it as a process of closure. She described it as, “It’s a way little by little that I can let him go.” When we watch someone suffer from an illness, particularly a long debilitating one, we might gain wisdom about the disease so that we can support others who are going through it with their loved ones. As aging diminishes our capacities and capabilities, wisdom calls us to take deep stock of ourselves in order to have clarity on our life’s priorities. When we support someone who is suffering, such as someone

who is homeless, though our suffering with them in solidarity doesn't compare to what they're suffering, we can come to a better understanding of the challenges they face. That understanding can transform us and imbue us with better empathy so we can be better advocates on their behalf.

We have a choice. We can heed the harlot, who beckons:

“You who are simple, turn in here!”
And to those without sense she says,
“Stolen water is sweet
and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.”
But they do not know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

The harlot tells us quick, easy ways to end suffering. They could be those glib, unhelpful phrases. It is the stolen, sweet water and the bread eaten in secret. They could be shortcuts to relieve our suffering in the present moment but will compound them later. Or it could be our own inflated egos and hubris.

Or we can heed Lady Wisdom, who beckons:

“You that are simple, turn in here!”
To those without sense she says,
“Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”

We'll find Lady Wisdom's bread and wine in the Torah. When we heed the lessons and teachings of Jesus, we can lay aside immaturity and live. Listen deeply to the Holy Spirit, who calls to us unceasingly. Let God's love guide and inform our choices. Remember the words from the prayer we say each week, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Suffering is unavoidable. However, suffering does not have to be in vain. Heed Wisdom's call. When we suffer, heed Wisdom. Eat her bread and drink her wine bearing in mind that redemptive suffering is our hope for our future, our healing, and our recovery.