

Sermon 020815 Suffering
Scripture Mark 1: 29-39
Sermon Title- Let Go; Let God

I spent a lot of time in late December and early January in Brigham and Women's Hospital visiting with a family loved one named Gloria Fluet. I raised her in prayer during Celebrations and Concerns. She has been on our prayer list for months. She is part of a study being done at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute to use stem cells in her fight with cancer. I've also visited with Gloria at her home in Sanford, ME since. She is still very, very sick.

Meg predicted that they would bring Gloria to death's door then bring her back again. That is exactly what happened. The only way I can describe Gloria's condition is to use the word 'suffering.' You could say that Gloria's suffering is good suffering because it is knocking her cancer into remission but it is suffering nonetheless. Watching a loved one suffer is one of the most painful and heartbreaking experiences I've ever had.

My sainted mother was 135 pounds when she was diagnosed with cancer. When she finally succumbed, she was less than 90lbs. It was horrible. I've worked to erase the memory so I can remember her as the healthy vibrant woman that she had been.

Suffering comes in many forms. There is suffering with a grave illness. There is suffering inflicted in the form of human cruelty of others. There is oppression and persecution. There is

suffering born out of natural disasters or things like car crashes. There is psychological suffering through mental illness. We speak of individuals having their demons. There is emotional suffering. In that category there is suffering called grief. There is spiritual suffering when someone feels cut off from God and the world. There are many other forms of suffering not listed here.

Suffering is not just bad; it is horrible. To suffer or to witness a love one suffer is about as bad as the human condition gets. But suffering is just that. It is the human condition. To live this life and never suffer is to not have fully lived this life.

Three questions come to mind when it comes to suffering:

1. Can any good come out of suffering?
2. Can we prepare ourselves for suffering?
3. How can we best cope when suffering comes to us or loved ones?

My answer to the first question, can any good come out of suffering is yes. Does good always come out of suffering? No. There is the adage, “That which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” I believe that to be true. If we endure suffering and survive it, it can build strength of character. It can deepen your understanding of what it means to be fully human.

Question #2 is, “Can we prepare ourselves for suffering?” My answer to that question is also yes. Last year, first in the Men’s Group and then in during Lent, we read a book called, “When Bad Things Happen To Good People” by Rabbi Harold Kushner. It addresses the issue of innocent suffering.

I believe that book is best read while all is well. I believe “When Bad Things Happen To Good People” is the original self help book that can help prepare you for when suffering arrives. If you have not read the book, I recommend it. It’s not a matter of if suffering strikes; it’s a matter of when.

The third question, “How do we best cope when suffering comes to us or loved ones” is the most interesting and compelling question. I think the answer is multi-faceted.

On one of our visits with Gloria, Gloria complained to Meg about her fairly constant nausea. Meg told Gloria what she did when she was nauseous from chemotherapy. She said that she closed her eyes, created stillness, and prayed. I think that is good advice no matter what the suffering is.

I think the worst thing that people do in time of suffering is to blame God. This is actually covered in Rabbi Kushner’s book. People have the idea that God sends

suffering in order to punish people for their sins, or to teach lessons. After the earthquake and tsunami hit Japan in 2011 there was a preacher in the American South who said that God was punishing Japan because they are not a Christian nation. That sort of thinking makes me crazy. Not only can I not imagine God working in the world in that way, but I could not worship that sort of God.

Natural disasters are acts of nature, not acts of God. People ask questions like, “Why is God doing this to me? Or why is God letting this happen? or It’s all part of God’s plan.”

All this comes from an image of God being all-powerful and deciding every little thing that happens in the world. It has us as mere actors unwittingly acting out a script that God wrote long ago.

If that were the case, how do we explain the Adam and Eve story? In the garden story, we received free will. We have the power to kill and we have the power to cure. We have the power to sin and the power to be righteous, the power to hurt and the power to heal. If God has all the power, how do you explain free will?

The first chapter of Genesis has God bringing order to chaos. Have you noticed that God didn’t complete the job

because there is plenty of chaos still around. Randomness is everywhere.

Also, accidents happen. Flight 205 has a bolt sheer in the engine, the plane crashes and lives are lost and ruined. Flight 207 had the same model engine and the bolt doesn't sheer and the plane lands safely and people go on with their lives. As I said, I could not imagine God deciding to sheer bolts nor could I worship such a God.

The God that I worship does not act in the world by having people murder each other, or sending disease, or moving mountains, or sheering bolts in plane engines. This is the world we live in with all its troubles and joys, all its happiness and suffering.

The God that I worship is the one to turn to in times of suffering. Prayer is the answer. I've been praying like crazy for Gloria during this time. I don't ask for things like a miracle that will make her instantly healthy. Whether I'm with her and I'm praying out loud or I'm not with her and praying for her, I ask God to give her strength, and peace, and resolve in order for her to best cope with the suffering.

God acts in the world in love. The love that her family has for Gloria, the love we have for each other here at

church, the love that people have when they are compassionate. God acts in human kindness.

One of the most unfortunate things about when people are in a period of suffering is this. Suffering can be so consuming that people lose touch with God. Suffering takes it's toll and people go negative about the world, get frustrated and angry with loved ones, just go dark and stay there.

Prayer can be difficult in time of suffering but in some ways, it's all we've got. Remember our gospel lesson this morning. Jesus healed many in that one short lesson including Peter's mother-in-law. We can push out negative thoughts with prayer. Prayer pushes out the negativity. If we bring God into the process, improve our state of mind, and continue to pray, healing can begin. Let go of the negative thoughts and let God heal. Let go; let God. AMEN