

SUFFERING
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April 13, 2014
Palm/Passion Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Psalm 31:9-16

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes waste away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.

Richard Rohr

If we cannot find a way to make our wounds into sacred wounds, we invariably become negative or bitter. Unless we can find meaning for human suffering, that God is somehow in it, and can even use it for good, humanity is in major trouble.

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Once upon a time a young man with a broken heart came to see the village Great Mother, she of great wisdom, mercy and compassion.

O Great Mother, please help me. My heart is broken. My suffering is unbearable. Can you cure me?

Yes, my son, I can. It will take just a few drops of oil.

The young man waited. The Great Mother waited.

Where is the oil, asked the young man?

Oh, she said, I don't have it. You must get it. It's a special kind of oil.

Where can I find it, he asked desperately?

You can find it in a household that has never been touched by suffering. Ask the head of that household for a few drops of oil and bring it back to me.

I'll be right back, shouted the young man.

And off he went to the richest family in the village. And then to the next and the next and the next and the next until he had visited every home in the village.

After a year he returned.

Where is the oil, asked the Great Mother?

I have none, he said.

How then shall I cure your suffering, she asked with a sly grin.

You can't. There is no escape from suffering. There is no cure.

That young man had found out what the Great Mother had found out long ago: *There is no cure for suffering. But there is healing.*

Suffering can turn us inward but it can also turn us outward, toward others. It's called compassion and it's the only thing that heals suffering, as that young man found out.

Once your heart breaks open, you never know who or what might fall in. As it turns out, a lot of good work can be done with a broken heart. Not *in spite of* but *with*.

A lot of good work can be done *with* a broken heart.

Today is Passion Sunday. "Passion" comes from a Latin word *passio* meaning suffering and enduring. Traditionally, "The Passion" refers to Christ's death on the cross, as popularized in the Mel Gibson film "The Passion of Christ."

But that's misleading. Very misleading.

Christ's passion was far more about living than dying. Crucifixion was not the goal of his life. Nor was success the goal of his life. The goal of his life was to faithfully serve the God of love and justice by lifting up the powerless and standing up to the powerful, exposing their heartless greed and insidious cruelty.

And in the time and place, the consequence of such action was crucifixion, the Empire's horrific deterrent to rebellion and insurrection. The Empire crucified thousands upon thousands along public thoroughfares as a warning. Jesus was only one of many. Today, the consequences are different. But there are still consequences for serving the God of love and justice.

In case you hadn't heard: *Jesus bids us live a dangerous love and, in love, he leads us along the way.* (Amy Mears and April Baker)

Long before his crucifixion Jesus' heart was broken open by the suffering of his people. As Marcus Borg author of *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, says: Most suffering in this world is caused by injustice in one form or another. And the poor, as it turns out, are most often the victims of unjust systems.

If you're paying attention these days you know that nearly all systems are rigged, if not consciously, then unconsciously in favor of the powerful, the rich and privileged. People like us. The poor are trampled into the dust again and again. To change that is a daunting task and can make ambitious, idealistic people bitter and hateful. That doesn't mean we acquiesce. It means we look for apt opportunities to do something good.

Last Sunday I shared a bit of wisdom with the confirmands, seven of our 9th and 10th graders. I shared a bit of wisdom I had learned long ago from Frederick Buechner. *If you want to know where you belong in life at any given moment or for a life long vocation find where your great joy in life intersects with some need of the world. That intersection just may be your place to be.*

After class one of the youth who is a self-admitted, happy computer nerd told me about a little project he had undertaken recently. He was collecting and refurbishing old laptop computers and giving them to classmates who didn't have one.

Really, I said. What a great project. That's what I was talking about this morning in class. Your joy and a need intersecting. To which the young man said (a bit condescendingly to his pastor), I know. That's why I told you. And, he continued, I'm hoping you'll ask the congregation to donate old laptops for me to fix up for those who need them.

Jesus didn't try to fix the whole world. He didn't travel far. He didn't race about trying to fix every problem or dismantling every evil system. He didn't go far in life. But he did go deep. Compassion is about going deep.

As Paul Claudel put it: *Jesus came not to explain suffering nor to take it away; he came to fill it with his presence.*

To walk with Jesus is to see the world through the eyes of compassion, to see those who are hungry, lonely, cold, sick, friendless, tormented, exploited, and in prison, including those imprisoned by debt, guilt and shame. And to walk with Jesus is also to see all those things in yourself and simply let the presence of love be there.

Breathe in. *God is love.* Breathe out. *I am love.*

Once upon a time a little girl walked along a beach with tears streaming down her face. The beach was strewn with thousands upon thousands of starfish, dying in the sun. She picked up one and hurled it into the sea. Then another, and another, and another and another and another.

From a dune overlooking the beach an old man watched. And then he shouted, little girl, what you're doing doesn't matter. There are too many for you to save. It doesn't really matter.

The little girl stared at the old man and then bent over and picked up another starfish and hurled it into the sea. And then she looked back at the old man and said: *It matters to that one. That one is back where it belongs.*

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HYMN

When We Are Living

'Mid times of sorrow and in times of pain,
when sensing beauty or in love's embrace,
whether we suffer, or sing rejoicing,
we belong to God; we belong to God.

Across this wide world, we shall always find
those who are crying with no peace of mind,
but when we help them, or when we feed them,
we belong to God; we belong to God.