

"For Christ's Sake"

Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - PSALM 109:1-5, 26-31
NEW TESTAMENT LESSON - 1 PETER 3:13-18

“Ministering to those who are hurting,” writes Ronald J.R. Mathies in his article *Wounded Healers*¹, “inevitably brings pain to the one seeking to help. “Workers training ‘trauma healers’ in South Africa say that people who counsel and care for victims of apartheid experience their own stress and trauma, and themselves need healing.

So why do people do it? Why do people subject themselves to suffering and pain for another human being when they don’t have to? When there’s plenty of other people to do it, no hope ever of completely overcoming the physical, mental and spiritual effects of pain, destruction, injury and loss; when the pain is going to continue no matter what we do – why do we do it? Why do human beings subject themselves to suffering for the sake of others when they don’t have to?

Like some of you, no doubt, I watched NBC Nightly News on Monday as the network showed what last Sunday’s tornado did to the people of Joplin, MO. – a tornado that Brian Williams described as the single deadliest since 1947; three quarters of a mile across; traveling on the ground for six miles; with winds topping 198 mph. The Weather Channel’s Mike Bettes was one of the first on the scene in Joplin. As we watch his coverage of the tornado’s impact, we hear him exclaim, “It’s tearing up the entire city!” And then later, as he walks through the debris, he says, “I’ve never seen anything like this. I’ve personally witnessed injuries and fatalities... People are just scrambling right now. Multiple homes, business: destroyed; cars that have been flipped; mangled debris. The scope of the damage, it’s kind of taking my breath away here.”

“The raw emotion of the moment,” says Al Roker, “was difficult for everyone witnessing it.” And as if to illustrate these words, we hear Mike Bettes choking back tears, saying “It’s tough, no question about that.” Mike Bettes will never completely overcome the sight of such destruction. Why do people put themselves in places of devastation? Is it because we just don’t know any better; we don’t know how it will affect us? Maybe; sometimes. But what about people who do know better, people who put themselves on the line day after day to be the first on the scene after tragedy strikes places like Joplin, MO or Sedalia? People like firefighters, EMS crews, police officers, soldiers, even reporters and news anchors.

¹ Mennonite Central Committee, www.mcc.org

And how about you, and me? How about people who absorb the blow of another person's anger without striking back? People who turn the other cheek, do not resist bullies and thugs and other forms of evil, people who pray for those who torment them; what about these people and how they respond to suffering? How do we account for them? What is it that has them face suffering with humility, courage: acceptance and hope?

In the words of Ronald Mathies, writer of that article I mentioned, people who put themselves in harm's way or suffer pain for the sake of others do so because they "recognize, even in the midst of violence and war, evidence of a living and loving God." What is it about faith in a living and loving God that enables people to give of themselves; to suffer for the sake of others; to take on another person's pain and loss as if it were their own?

In today's New Testament Lesson, Peter says that "even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed." Now it's important here to note that we're not talking about putting up with abuse or torment at the hands of another with no regard for your own wellbeing. Inflicting suffering on another human being is wrong, and it should not be tolerated – by anybody. And yet, we all suffer in life. Maybe you were the littlest in school and got picked on – or the biggest, smartest, dumbest, coolest, and geekiest – you name it, and people have been picked on for it. Maybe you have depression, or are out of work or in a dead-end job, or quietly and prayerfully suffering marital or other family squabbles. Whatever it is that has you experiencing pain and suffering in your life, the question isn't should suffering exist; we can't get away from it. The question is *how do we respond to suffering?*

If we're talking about witnessing the suffering of others – like those in Joplin, MO – the answer is easy. We help. But if we're talking about suffering ourselves, that's when our response is not so easy. Our initial response to suffering is to fight it. That's natural; that's healthy. And often, when we fight against suffering in an appropriate way we find relief.

But what if we don't? What if we've done all we can do and still we're stuck – the kids at school are still bullying us, the family squabbles never end, the economy has us trapped in a dead-end job, a house we can't afford to keep. What do we do in response to this type of suffering – this type of suffering and the types of suffering that many of you know all too well?

Peter saw that those drawn to the early church were suffering. As they turned away from their society's many gods and idols, and refused to participate in non-Christian practices, or take part in pagan festivals, these followers of Christ were setting themselves up for abuse.

Do you ever feel out of step with society because you're a Christian? If so, when does this happen? Have any of us ever had the nagging feeling that staying in bed on Sunday morning would be so much easier; that playing golf would be a lot more fun? Does your Christian faith cause you to give beyond your means when someone's in need – financially or physically; to go that extra mile when you feel like you don't have the energy, take another step?

Have you ever refused to be around a group of kids or even adults because you knew what they were doing was wrong – even if they are the “cool” kids or the “successful” adults; or the ones skating by while everyone else works their butts off? This is what we do as Christians. Oh, it’s not only Christians who do these things. It’s just that Christians do them for a different, special and distinct reason. *What do Christians have that others don’t?*

As Christians, we have a hidden storehouse of energy, a faith that assures us we’ll be okay financially in the future; the conviction that doing the right thing – even if it’s harder – will bring blessings in the long run. AND ..., as Christians...we have a history that backs this up. As Christians, we have a history going all the way back to Abraham and Sarah that says if you love the Lord with all your heart and all your strength and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself, you will be blessed. And because we have such a history as Christians, we have a way of sharing our faith with others. We can tell the stories of our Christian history, stand firm in living Christian lives, and share this with others who may not know the blessing of being a Christian.

In doing this, in sharing who we are as Christians, we actually help to bring about a world in which the suffering we endure begins to ease up a bit. If more people were to give as needed rather than as they imagine they’re able, then more people’s needs would be met – including ours. If more people were to do the right thing for the sake of doing it – regardless of how much harder it is compared to taking the easy way out – then doing the right thing would be the easiest thing most people do.

If more people refused to respond to anger with more anger, hate with more hate, violence with more violence, then there would be less anger, hate and violence in the world. But that’s the easy part of being a Christian. The hard part about being a Christian is being the one who suffers financial anxiety after giving sacrificially; being the one who opts out of Sunday’s downtime or sports activity to be engaged at church or, anytime during the week, to be active in ministry in the community; the hard part is being the one who withstands the teasing or the bullying or the anger, *and* even manages to pray for and console the one who attacks us.

Most people don’t respond that way. Most people live in a world defined by the following maxims or sayings:

1. Happiness is merely the remission of pain.
2. Friends may come and go, but enemies accumulate.
3. If you can smile when things go wrong, you've already thought of someone to blame.
4. By the time you can make ends meet, they move the ends. AND, I love this one:
5. Never wrestle with a pig; you both get dirty and the pig likes it.

The hard part is living as a Christian who may laugh at such sayings, but in the end, knows that living selflessly ultimately wins the day. This is the hard part, because, quite frankly, sometimes our suffering does overcome us. Sometimes we do end up in terrible financial shape, sometimes we get punched or ignored or left behind at school or on the ball field, sometimes being attacked by another person or group costs us dearly.

Why would we do it? Why and how do we then manage to respond without perpetuating the cycle of suffering would we put ourselves at such risk? Because of our faith. Because, as Peter said, “it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.” God allows suffering in this world. God allows human beings to choose to hurt each other. But that doesn’t make it right.

What makes it right is Jesus Christ. Because God raised Jesus Christ from the grave, we need not fear any suffering; any suffering we may undergo – even if we’re sure such suffering is going to be the end of us. Henri Nouwen puts it this way: “Yes, there is such a thing as a good death. We ourselves are responsible for the way we die. We have to choose between clinging to life in such a way that death becomes nothing but a failure, or letting go of life in freedom so that we can be given to others as a source of hope. This is a crucial choice,” says Nouwen, “and we have to ‘work’ on that choice every day of our lives. Death does not have to be our final failure, our final defeat in the struggle of life, our unavoidable fate.

If our deepest human desire is indeed to give ourselves to others,” “then we can make our death into a final gift.”² I find Nouwen’s words inspiring, not only in regards to our physical deaths but also and even more so in regard to what we *experience* as the dying off of some part of us – the dying off of our sense of entitlement; our sense that we need to get our fair share even at the expense of others; the sense that we deserve to be on top – to be the big man on campus or the gal who turns all the heads, gets all the attention – the dying off of our sense that we have to protect OUR lives at any cost – even at the cost of another human being’s life or the welfare of future generations). Sometimes suffering does bring blessing to us, and to countless others.

So no, protecting these temporal, live-for-today, self-oriented aspects of our lives, that’s not what we’re called to as Christians. We have *not* picked the easy way out, the easy road to travel in life. We’ve picked the hard way – or been picked for the hard way, and voluntarily accepted it. We’ve committed ourselves to trying, day by day, to learn how to better live into our faith as Christians – our difficult, selfless, less-than-perfect faith.

Why? How do we bear up under this? Peter gives us the answer when he says, “... Christ ... suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, *in order* to bring you to God.” As Christians, we have *the assurance that in all things, God is with us*. We are with God. And if we suffer, we suffer for Christ’s sake; we suffer as representations of Jesus in the world. We suffer and yet stand up to it in faith, so that the world might see there is something beyond ourselves worth living for – worth dying for – something beyond our earthly lives. We suffer because in our suffering, the world sees Christ’s suffering – if we choose to show it.

The next time you’re set with a decision about taking the easy way out or doing what you know God would have you do, ask yourself, which will I choose? And why? Take a moment to

² *Life of the Beloved* (Crossroad, 1992), quoted in *Context*, April 1, 1998, 4.

imagine yourself answering that question right now. The easy way or the right way; and why; for whom?

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Compassionate God, there is much hurt and sadness in our world and in us. We see the destruction of Joplin, hear about homes damaged in Sedalia, and our hearts hurt for the lives that have been lost and disrupted. We also pray for those lost in war and service to their country. We rack our brains looking for some reason such things happen, looking for a ray of hope amid the darkest hours of our lives and the lives of people close to us. Let us in our search not loose sight of you. Help us to see that you are working amid the needs right in front of us.

And in those times when we are running from one thing to another, so consumed by our everyday lives, help us to not loose sight of Jesus in our midst. Let us know that he is right here beside us, ready to guide us, encourage us, and embrace us. And in Christ's presence, let us be saved from those times when we might be abrupt, dismissive or distracted, times when we might just pass by someone in need.

Yes, open our eyes, Lord, to see those among us who are in need. Open our ears to hear the cry of persons in anguish. Open our heart to those who would be our neighbor. Help us to be a friend to all; help us to be a presence of love and compassion for those we meet, to reach out beyond friend and neighbor and embrace even the stranger in our midst.

For we come to this time of worship to draw closer to you, but we leave here equipped to draw closer to one another. Inspire us, Lord, when we leave this place, to leave here as peacemakers, healers, and joy givers. And remind us that there are people here right now who need a true expression of our presence and love in their lives.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus, who in the spirit of divine love and provision, gave us the Lord's Prayer, that we might share its meaning with one another, just as assuredly as we share in its words, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.