

"Seeing Past Suffering"

Romans 8:18-25

July 17, 2011

5th Sunday After Pentecost

Perspective is important. If we simply view circumstances at face value without some sort of perspective of where they came and where they are going, we may be very wrong. For example, we may say that hunger in your life is bad. But that evaluation may change with perspective. If we know that you are hungry because of a deliberate decision to go on a diet and that going hungry for the present time leads to weight loss, then you would say that, from this perspective, hunger was actually good.

The same would be true for pain. On the surface, we would conclude that pain in your life is bad. But this evaluation may also change with perspective. If we know that you are in pain because of a deliberate decision to work out five days a week at a local gym and that enduring this present pain leads to you getting into shape, then you would say that, from this perspective, pain was actually good.

What about suffering? Who could ever say that suffering is good or that it even makes sense? We have seen so much suffering lately. There are the so-called "natural disasters." There were the horrible earthquakes in Haiti and Japan. There were terrible tornadoes in Alabama and Joplin, MO. There were fires in Arizona. There were floods in North Dakota and our own Montana.

There is also ongoing suffering. There are diseases: AIDs, cancer, and the latest fatal diseases. There is famine and starvation where people don't have adequate food or drink. There is poverty where people lack the basic necessities of life. And, of course, there is suffering common to us all: aging and death.

There is also special suffering that goes on in the lives of Christians. The world seems more hostile than ever to Christian beliefs and morality and now they are not afraid to show it. Many will reject God, His Word, and the faith we share. That affects us. Christians are subject to ridicule, rejection, and, in some parts of the world, to all out persecution.

Is suffering bad? On the surface, there is no question but that the answer is a resounding “yes”! As a result, we end up using so much of our time and resources to “fix” suffering. We pin our hope for the future on ending suffering and building a better society.

The same is true for our Christian faith. Many Christians assume that, if we are suffering or being rejected, ridiculed, or persecuted, then we must be doing something wrong. Some Christians will try to change the doctrines so that they are not so offensive to the world. Some Christians will try to update the morality so it is more acceptable to the world. Maybe you have done some of these things just to try and get along. Some Christians will simply abandon the faith entirely because they feel the hassle just isn't worth it. Perhaps you have been tempted to do this.

Here's where we need to have some perspective. By looking to the past – to the origin of suffering – we can have some understanding.

Suffering was not created by God nor was it ever His design for creation or humanity. There is nothing “natural” about natural disasters for this was not the way God created the world to be. The Bible says, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31). Notice what it says about the physical world. It was not created to be bad and cause suffering and destruction. God created it, not just to be “good”, but “very good.”

When Adam and Eve sinned, that not only affected humanity and our relationship with God, it affected the entire creation. As the sin of Adam and Eve was cursed by God, so, too, was creation cursed. God said, “Cursed is the ground because of you;...It will produce thorns and thistles for you.” (Gen. 3:17-18) Our text describes what has been true to this day: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.” As part of its curse, creation would be the source of suffering and pain. It would be decaying and falling apart.

Humanity was likewise cursed. Life for all people would be filled with suffering and pain as a result of sin. You see it in your life. Anger, hostility, and conflict with others are all results of sin.

Violate God's law and you suffer the consequences for that sin. Cheat on a test or a tax form and you'll be punished. Get drunk and you'll get a hangover. Steal or murder and you'll be thrown in jail.

But shouldn't life be different because we are Christians? Shouldn't our relationship with Christ mean that we are freed from suffering? Not at all! Since the time of the first sin, there has been enmity (conflict) between the seed of Satan and humanity. This causes sin. Sin brings suffering and death.

Yet it is by suffering and death that salvation from sin is obtained. The Bible warns, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." (Gal. 3:10). In other words, we are subject to suffering, pain, and death if we do not do everything that God commands in His Law. Yet Jesus redeemed us. He paid the price to release us from this curse and all that it brings by taking that curse on Himself. The Bible says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole." (Gal. 3:13) Christ took upon Himself our curse, our suffering, and our death by hanging on a cross in our place.

We are released from the curse of our sin by our connection to Christ through our baptisms. But that connection to Christ means we go the same way He has gone – through suffering and pain. That is why we are called "followers". We not only follow His teachings. We follow His life. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15:18, 20)

So, we have a little perspective here on suffering as we view its origin. Natural disasters and difficulties are not natural, nor are they intentional. It is not the way God intended for things to be. God is not out to get us through nature nor is nature out to get us (as some people seem to think). Nature is screwed up because of the curse of sin.

We suffer as Christians, not because God is punishing us or because we are doing something wrong in our beliefs and practices, but precisely because we are faithful in our proclamation and our practice. Suffering for our faith means we are doing something right.

Understanding the origin of suffering is somewhat helpful in understanding our state here, but that understanding doesn't help resolve or remove the suffering. For that, we need more perspective

about the outcome of suffering. If we can see a greater good from suffering (like we do from the unpleasantness of dieting or exercising), we are more likely to be accepting of it and able to endure it.

According to our text, all of creation groans under its bondage to sin and decay as much as we groan because of the suffering it causes us. Creation longs to be set free and returned to the “very good” status it had when God created it. And restored it will be. But the time now, the Scripture says, is like that of the pains of childbirth. As a woman gives birth to a child, the pain is intense and unbearable. Yet that pain brings forth a new life in the child that is born. That is the only thing that makes it worth it. The tornadoes, floods, fires, and earthquakes; the sickness, famine, drought, and poverty; these are all the birth pains which creation is going through. Yet, on the final day, a new creation will come forth which is perfect and at peace. That is the only thing which makes the present suffering worth it.

The same is true for us as Christians. Jesus Christ not only suffered and died. He came out of the grave and lived. He has conquered death, the devil, and hell itself. Through our baptismal connection, we are joined to that victory. We are already sons and daughters of God through our adoption by Him into His family. The “paperwork” was signed at Calvary with the blood of Jesus Christ. It was ratified and certified by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Like an orphan who has been adopted yet waits at the orphanage for his new parents to pick him up, we, too, have been adopted. We are waiting for our Savior to come and pick us up. We wait for our true glory as children of God to be revealed to us, to the world, and even to the devil himself.

What a glorious day that will be! As bad as our suffering in creation has been and as bad as our suffering for being Christ’s followers has been, it is nothing compared to what is about to take place. Paul has the audacity to write, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” In other words, in the scale of your life, the suffering, sadness, pain and disappointment weigh you down. But the glory, the joy, the

excitement, and the pure pleasure that will be ours tips the scales so far in the other direction as to make our situation here and now insignificant in comparison.

As Christians, therefore, we have hope. This hope is not a weak and wimpish wish that everything will work out in the end. Biblical hope is a sure thing. Biblical hope is the sure and certain expectation of someday receiving that which is ours but which we cannot see and do not yet have in our possession. Because of that certainty, because of that surety, because of God's promise made through the death of Christ and backed up by the resurrection of Christ, we are able remain still in a world where suffering swirls all around us and wait patiently for this hope to be fulfilled.

Christians are not idiots. We do not deny the reality of suffering. We are not naïve optimists with simplistic answers to suffering: "Don't worry! Be happy!" We do not promise a life free of suffering because we have faith in Jesus Christ. We readily admit the existence of suffering and know its origin. Precisely because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we are able to look past suffering to the restoration of all things in Christ. Thus, we are able to live in quiet confidence and with enduring hope. Paul's words to the Corinthians say it best:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Amen