

LESSONS IN LIVING

Why Is There Suffering?

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
February 27, 2011

Scripture Readings from *The Inclusive Bible*:

Job 3:20-26

Romans 8:18-23

Romans 8:35-39

Our topic today is: "Why is there suffering?" and I'm quite aware, before I even start, that probably the worst sermons have been on this topic, and probably some of the worst sermons you've heard in your life have tried to tackle this monstrosity of a topic.

One of the things I want to assure you from the start is that our purpose today is not to defend God; I think God can take care of God's self. But instead to ask the question, "How do we keep trusting life in the face of suffering?" That's the real question that our scriptures call us to ask. And I say they call us to the *question*, because if you look at Job, it doesn't answer the question of suffering. It doesn't *try* to. It goes deeper into the question. It haunts you. It asks the question, "Why even show the light of day to someone who suffers so much?" It's a question that we ask in despair. Then Paul, who's more upbeat, still does not try to answer the question of *why* there is pain and suffering. Instead, he sees it as a struggling to give birth, which to those of us who believe in evolution that's kind of the struggling of earth, of human kind, of all the species; to do something better. That's a way of trying to understand. Usually the sermons that try to give an answer are worse than the problems you're trying to deal with. I'm not trying to do the Robert Schuller thing: "Turn your scars into stars, your problems into possibilities." That's easy to say, and it can distract us from our pain for a little while, but then we go back. What scripture calls us to do is to trust the process of grieving - trusting that something is healing, something is growing.

I want to talk about the three things that I know about suffering. You may know a whole lot more. But in my years of ministry, the three things that I've learned about suffering may not seem like a lot, but it's what I know. First thing I know about suffering is that it hurts. Now that seems like a very stupid beginning to a sermon, but that's exactly the point that gets left out of most sermons about suffering. It hurts, and it doesn't just hurt a little bit sometimes. Sometimes the pain is so overpowering that religion and philosophy is like salt on the wound. The worst is at funerals. For some reason, religious people feel like they need to say something at funerals. And, so typically you'll hear some of the most hurtful things at a funeral. I was at one where the preacher was the problem. As I said in Sunday school today, never invite a preacher to a funeral. (Laughter.) A child had died, and instead of just being with the grieving parents, he actually said, "God must have needed a little angel for the choir." Now we need people in our choir, but we're not going to kill people to get them. (Laughter) And I'm assuming that the Deity has a little more class than that too.

But I've been guilty of that--when you first get out of seminary, unless you've been through a lot of counseling training, a lot of times you feel like that's your job, and as the week goes on, you're trying to come up with the sermon, the standard lowers and lowers as it gets closer and closer to the time, you're just trying to do something. It's like you're trying to fix the flat just so it holds air until it gets out of your sight and go back home. (Laughter). It can get that desperate sometimes. But I thought I had come up a really good idea for a sermon. The punch line was, "What you lose in some ways, you gain in other ways." Now most of the time, that's good advice--you lose something in some way, you gain in another way. So people are coming through, and most of them are saying, "Good sermon, good sermon." Then this woman comes up, and her forehead is indented, and she says, "I have brain cancer, and I've had surgery after surgery on my brain." And she grabs my hand, and she holds it, and she says, "And I've gained some things, but mainly I've lost," and she squeezes my hand and lets go. She very lovingly taught me don't ever do that again. (Laughter) So I can't tell you what to do because my job is not to minimize your pain by coming up with superficial answers to it.

What this first point, suffering hurts, really means, is to say, don't minimize your own pain. When you are suffering, take the time to heal, and recognize that in other people. When people are ugly to you, most of the time they've got a harpoon through their heart and you can't see it. Most of the time when people are ugly, or dumb – perfectly intelligent people acting dumb and saying dumb things--it's because they're hurting and they can't get up to a higher level of functioning. So realizing that pain hurts and takes time to heal is a first step that should never be left out. The remedies we do to pain are often more debilitating than the pain itself. The distance we put between ourselves and other people, the chances we don't take in life, can hurt us worse than all the disappointments we've ever had put together.

So first is to honor, or realize that it hurts, but also, suffering teaches. Now I'm not saying that God sends suffering so that you'll learn something. I'm not one of those persons who believe that the earth is a school for the soul, and then you learn those lessons, and then you go on. I mean, if it is a school, then it's got one major drawback; it kills all its pupils. (Laughter) That's a big drawback. Nobody graduates. You've heard people say something like, "Well, the reason you lost your left foot was God wanted to teach you how to hop better on your right foot." You know whatever you come up with is going to be dumb. Sometimes things happen. Now I've strained this whole week to come up with a synonym for that bumper sticker: "Stuff happens." (Laughter) And anything I thought of just got worse and worse. (Laughter) You know what I'm talking about. Sometimes it's important to just realize that. Because the stories we tell ourselves about our suffering sometimes hurt us worse than the actual suffering.

Have you ever had something really bad happen to you, and you ask yourself, "Why did this happen to me?" Well sometimes it didn't. Sometimes it just happened. And when you try to weave a story around that event, it can make the universe crazier and crazier. And that's a polite way of saying it can make you crazier and crazier. To come up with a story about why something terrible happened to you or to someone else is usually not as helpful as saying, "It just hurts. It's pain." But we can learn from it. It wasn't sent to teach us something, but we can learn from it.

Aristotle said something very un-Aristotelian. He said that "Perceiving is suffering." Think about it. You are a sentient being. When you perceive, it's not just neutral observation. It either feels good or it feels bad. It may be very subtle, but to feel pleasure, you have to be able to feel pain. To numb yourself to the pains of life also numbs you to the joys of life. So Aristotle knew what he was talking about, sometimes. To perceive is to suffer.

Schopenhauer went even further. He said, "The more intelligent you are, the more your capacity to suffer." That's kind of scary, isn't it? But haven't you recognized that in your own life? The more you

learn about yourself and others and the world, the more your heart opens up to the sufferings of others, and you may want to close the blinds, but you can't anymore. So after suffering leads us to healing – calls us to healing anyway – after it calls us to learn and to grow, it calls us to care. When you cry, those tears are calling out to somebody; they are a social signal. When you say, “What has happened to you?” it hasn't just happened to you; it's happened to humankind. What you're feeling is the world wound, and it may be happening in your life, but it's happening to everybody. When you cry, that's a social signal. When someone else cries, it tugs at your heart. But because it hurts to feel sometimes, you're left with the choice of pulling back, or reaching out. And we have that choice day-in, day-out, time after time; to pull back from the suffering of the world, to numb the suffering within us, or to find something stronger.

Freud is not known as one of the great lovers of humankind, necessarily. He said, “The more we love, the more defenseless we are to suffering.” Now I don't know what his point was in that, but it's really true. If comfort is your highest value, you will lose the capacity to love. Love calls you, not only out of your own comfort zone, but to face pain sometimes, because it hurts to love. That's the symbol of Jesus on the cross. It's not that God got mad and punished and all that. It's that it hurts to love; it hurts to keep your heart open. George Elliot said something like this, and I won't get it exactly, but it's, “When there's suffering and sin in the world, then suffering is a part of love.” When you look at the world, and there's suffering in the world, suffering with others is a part of that love. But here is the punch line that wasn't said so far -- when we say yes to the healing, when we say yes to the wisdom, when we say yes to the calling to care for others, we develop a love - we don't even develop it; it comes from the inside out - that's worth the pain. See, that's the punch line -- to love is worth the pain. So, scripture doesn't give you a religious answer to the problem of suffering. You don't need that; you don't want it. When you hurt, it's not good enough, and when somebody else hurts, it's not going to help. Scripture calls you deeper into the suffering that you've already got. It doesn't try to give you suffering you don't already have.

If you're not suffering, I'm not recommending that you go and hurt yourself. But it comes calling on a fairly regular basis, doesn't it? So to hear suffering as a calling; to heal; to take that time, to learn never to think that it was sent so that you would learn, but that it is always available for you to learn something out of it, and finally a calling; to go out into the world and reduce the suffering of all beings, knowing that the attitude, the gift of that kind of life, a love that is worth the pain.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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