

SERMON: The Suffering is Real
TEXT: Mark 8:31-38

2-28-21

A friend of mine who pastors a church in another part of the country had to work through a difficult issue recently with the Session (aka Governing Board) of the church. Another staff member - who was also a church member - turned in her resignation after serving on the staff for a number of years. She was leaving, not because she was retiring or moving on to another opportunity. She was leaving because she was no longer happy in her job. This person was loved and appreciated as a part of the church family and as an excellent employee. She would also be leaving the church.

After a long and painful discussion at the Session meeting, they voted to accept her resignation and move forward. Though the issue had been resolved, the pastor voiced her concern over how the problem was handled. She felt it important to make the church leaders aware of this so that they might avoid similar missteps in the future.

One of the members stayed to speak with the pastor after everyone else had left. Though he was typically supportive of her, this time he told her she was wrong. "Everything was rosy," he said. "We could have ended the meeting on a

positive note, but your comments turned it into a negative. You should have left it alone.”

“Then [Jesus] he began to teach [the disciples] that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, *Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*”

Just prior to this passage is a brief conversation Jesus had with his disciples while they all traveled to the next town. Jesus asked what people were saying about him, and then he asked, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered confidently and correctly, “You are the Messiah.”

Messiah. Anointed One. Savior. Up to this point, Peter has been an eyewitness to Jesus healing the deaf and the blind, cleansing a leper, raising the dead, casting out demons, feeding thousands, stilling a storm, and walking on water. Peter has become accustomed to the great power and authority demonstrated

by Jesus. So, it's understandable that he also imagines victory and glory and exaltation for the future.

Then when Jesus begins to talk openly of suffering and dying, Peter is taken aback. Suffering and dying don't fit the pretty picture that Peter has conjured in his imagination. Peter takes Jesus aside and basically tells him to hush. "Listen Jesus, everything is rosy and positive. Don't spoil it with all that negativity."

Most of us would side with Peter in this case. With everything going so well, why would Jesus insist on sharing that the road ahead will be treacherous? Even if he was aware of it, why couldn't he let the disciples remain blissfully ignorant?

One commentary explains: "Confronted with the necessity of suffering, most people react exactly like Peter. The necessity of suffering is not simply a pious desire to imitate Jesus; much of what is truly worthwhile can be accomplished only by those who are willing to trust Jesus' word that suffering belongs to God's plan. In a *pain-killer* culture, a balanced understanding of suffering is difficult to achieve. Jesus sets out the challenge for us to think as God does, not as human beings normally do. Jesus' healing miracles and his compassion for the crowds at the feeding miracles make it clear that God does not delight in human suffering.

The disciples were sent out to heal as well as to preach the gospel. Yet danger lies in concluding that suffering and self-sacrifice are always undesirable.” (Mark 8:31-33,

The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vo. VIII, Matthew, Mark)

THE SUFFERING IS REAL. And the suffering must be faced head-on.

I remember a conversation I had with my grandmother, when she explained why she enjoyed Christmas more than Easter. I don’t remember her exact words, but the idea was that Christmas is so beautiful and joyful. The music, the lights, the decorations, the gifts, family gatherings, and a newborn baby. And throughout Advent we focus on hope, love, joy, and peace. What’s not to love? It’s all good. But Easter, while it celebrates resurrection and new life, is only reached by the way of suffering. The road to resurrection is pretty dark and depressing. There’s a lot of suffering that has to happen before we get to Easter.

Of course, my grandmother was talking of our church celebrations. We all know that our secular and commercial society has been striving to lift Easter to the level of Christmas for a long time. Part of this effort, of course, is to leave Lent out of the picture altogether. All the songs are like funeral dirges, all in minor keys, with a focus on sacrifice and suffering, blood and the cross, dying and death. A

woman in one of my previous churches objected to the sanctuary decorations for Lent, consisting of black and burlap and unadorned grapevine wreaths because they were “ugly.” Well, in my mind then, the decorations were perfect, because suffering is ugly. And suffering is real.

And suffering is a necessary part of our faith.

“[Jesus] called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*”

Quoting again from the commentary, “The disciples have participated in Jesus’ ministry of preaching and healing. Now they discover that they must also participate in the ministry of suffering. Anyone who attempts to call the world to account before the gospel must be ready to sacrifice self-interest.... There are

many ways in which the gospel calls us to deny self in order to be more like Christ.” (Mark 8:31-33, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vo. VIII, Matthew, Mark)

Following my sermon, we will be hearing the last in our series of African American Spiritual anthems which we have highlighted each Sunday this month to celebrate Black History. Today’s anthem: *Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen*. This spiritual, which originated during the time of slavery, initially seems to present an oxymoron of the highest level. *Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows my sorrow. Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Glory hallelujah!*

You have to wonder how those last two words of faith and praise fit with the life of a slave, a life full of trouble. But for me the second verse resolves the conflict. *Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows like Jesus. Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Glory hallelujah!*

First, let’s be clear. There is no generation of African Americans who have chosen to deny themselves the basic human rights and freedoms that all people deserve. They have not chosen to suffer under centuries of oppression. They are not martyrs for their faith. They are victims of injustice.

For that matter, however, neither did Jesus choose the suffering which he experienced. Later in Mark we will read the prayer Jesus prayed out of his deep grief, in the garden before he was arrested. “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

(Mark 14:36)

Faithful people of color throughout the centuries have connected with Jesus in his suffering. Jesus understands their pain; they do not suffer alone. And knowing that Jesus was also resurrected - knowing that sorrow is not the end of the road - they hold tight to the promise of new life to come. So, their song of lament for the *trouble they've seen* is also a song of hope. *Glory hallelujah*.

People of God, THE SUFFERING IS REAL. We may not choose it, but let us not deny it. People of God, hope is also real. If even the slaves can hang on to hope, singing *glory hallelujah*, may we also continue our journey in hope... to the glory of God!

AMEN.