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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
June 5, 2011

“The Sense of Suffering”

I Peter 5:6-11, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=173850617>

I wish all of you could join us for one of our weekly staff meetings. On Wednesday afternoons, upstairs around a conference table, Heather, Patrice, Pam, Linda, Ed, Christiane, Lois, Wil, and I gather together. We coordinate calendars and talk about logistics for upcoming events. We share pastoral concerns we know about in the congregation and pray for one another and those in need. In these staff meetings, we laugh; we listen; we get sidetracked and sometimes we actually get back on track. Often we ponder a theological question together. For example, a while ago a question was asked about why we pour the grape juice out from the pitcher each time we celebrate communion. In many churches around the world, the chalice already contains juice or wine and it is simply elevated as the words of institution are spoken. Another question once asked involved which words we should use as the communion bread is torn in half: This is my body broken for you, or This is my body given for you. Both versions can be found in scripture. To say “this is my body broken for you” emphasizes the suffering Jesus endured and puts that at the center of the communion meal. To say “this is my body given for you” emphasizes the gift of loving grace that is also at the heart of the communion meal – for God in Christ literally gives himself to us so that we might be one with God as Christ himself is one with God.

In today’s scripture passage from I Peter, several powerful words are used that could be unpacked in this sermon: phrases like “humble yourself,” and in two places, the word “suffering.” The young church to whom this epistle was written was enduring a time of suffering. Most likely there was harassment, verbal abuse, and even bodily punishment being inflicted upon these believers because of their professions of faith and, even more so, their actions of faith. But rather than give you a church history lesson, I want us to approach the reading from I Peter while seated before this communion table and see what sense we can make of the topic of suffering as we prepare to receive the bread and cup of Christ.

The story of Jesus Christ has four main parts to it. The incarnation: God becoming flesh and dwelling among us; the teaching: the words and miracles of this rabbi from Nazareth; the suffering and crucifixion on the cross; and the resurrection from the dead on Easter culminating in Christ’s ascension into heaven. Communion in the church embodies all four parts to this, the greatest story ever told. Think about it. The incarnation – this is my body; the teachings – do this in remembrance, remembering me; the suffering – the bread is broken in half, and in a parallel action with the second element, the juice is poured into the chalice; and the resurrection – remembering how the risen Christ appeared at table with the disciples and was recognized in the breaking of the bread. It’s a four-part story: God present in our world, incarnation; we get that. Jesus’ wisdom and ethics that guide our daily life; we get that. Christ’s resurrection from the dead, the belief that love is stronger than death itself; on some gut level, we get that.

But understanding suffering, that's hard. No one wants to think about it, much less endure actual harassment, torture, or martyrdom. It makes us really uncomfortable. How do you make sense of suffering? You can't, especially if you try to make sense of it while focusing on the suffering itself: being abused, being wrongly accused, being tortured or violated or imprisoned unjustly. For this conversation, we can't start there. So instead, imagine yourself in a comfortable chair with your eyes closed. You've just finished a time of prayer and now you are opening your eyes and taking a deep breath, aware that God is near. Then in that moment you stop and acknowledge that in this beautiful, fragile, broken and hurting world, suffering happens. Some suffering happens because our bodies fall apart. Nerves, veins, muscles, bones – physical things wear out and that causes pain and suffering. Some suffering happens because of bad choices and bad luck – pride, greed, fear, addiction, loneliness can prompt us to make bad decisions and we suffer for it. It happens. We kick ourselves for these bad choices; we pay the consequences for them too. God is still in the equation and is often the guide and comforter that helps pull us through these situations, but there's no denying that stuff happens. Suffering happens. That's a given in this mortal life.

The conversation in I Peter is a bit different, in that the suffering it refers to is suffering that comes from living a Christian life in a world that plays by other rules. Go back to the earlier scenario. You're praying with closed eyes in a comfortable chair. You take a deep breath and open your eyes, aware that God is near. Then you stand up and say "Jesus Christ is Lord," giving priority to Christ over all other powers on earth: over your boss, your bank account, the federal government, multinational corporations, political parties, or military authorities. In New Testament times, saying that meant that allegiance to Christ took precedence over allegiance to Caesar and the Roman Empire. Today it still means Christ takes precedence over the modern Empire, wherever its iron grip still lays claim to our lives. To declare Jesus is Lord means that we are about the work of liberation, just as Jesus preached in his first sermon in Nazareth: *To bring good news to the poor (the literal poor), to proclaim release to the captives (those literally behind bars), to offer recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor* (Lk 4:18-19). To declare Jesus is the risen Lord is to take to heart the instructions he gave us before ascending into heaven: *The Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations ... You are witnesses of these things* (Lk 24:46-48).

You arise from prayer; you open your eyes and profess Jesus Christ is Lord and thus you are a living witness to his glory, power, and grace. But to do that will have consequences. To do that can lead to awkwardness, harassment, even suffering. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann has said, "In a superficial, apathetic, and dehumanized society, the willingness to risk suffering can be a sign of spiritual health."¹ This suffering is not something you seek out. It is something that finds you. Churches must constantly ask themselves, "If suddenly tomorrow morning our congregation were not here, would anyone notice? If we personally were on trial for our Christian faith, would there be enough evidence to convict us?"

Now the witness we offer to Christ as Lord is often an indirect witness. It is like when all the world is walking one path, we quietly, firmly choose to walk a different path. When those around us insist that we must do something that is unjust or unkind, we simply decline to participate in such acts. We offer alternatives that are just and kind. We speak of forgiveness that doesn't exact a pound of flesh or an eye for an eye. We speak of humility, fully aware that all fall short of the glory of God, yet knowing God loves us nonetheless. We light candles in darkness. We pull those in from the margins. We repent. We extend mercy. We do all this, even when the consequences are hard, because in this walk of faith is a life that ultimately makes sense.

It is to this type of faith-life that the words in First Peter were composed. "Humble yourselves under God" – trust in the Lord. "Cast your anxiety upon God who cares for you." "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion, evil, the devil, looks for someone to devour. Show resistance. Be steadfast in your faith. Know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering."

It is that last line that helps me make sense of suffering – the reminder that our grappling with suffering is never just an individual struggle; it is corporate. It is not just personal; it is congregational. We make our individual, hard decisions, our times of saying "No" to a world that would insist on an unjust "Yes," our individual times of saying "Forgiveness" to a society that is quick to shout "Punishment." Yet these individual decisions are all part of our shared life together under God. They are always understood in terms of a church of Christ's followers who gather for worship and prayer; understood in terms of a community that gathers at a communion table and stands beside people who are different from one another, who often suffer much more than you or me, who are wounded like us and yet together receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

Which leads me to my last point: We say "This is my body broken for you" and "This is my body given for you" because both translations are correct. Initially the loaf is intact. It is whole, a potentiality from God beautiful in its completeness. Then the loaf is torn. It is broken. Suffering happens. It is unavoidable, especially as we profess Christ in a world that lives by worshipping false gods and other lords. But then the loaf, broken as it is, is given to us. The act of breaking makes it available for more to partake of it. Because we tear it, we can share it. The gifts of God for you and me, the people of God.

There's an honesty and a comfort in this double choice of words: Christ's body broken for you, Christ's body given for you. Suffering love, generous love. Gifts of God for the people of God. In that good news things begin to make sense. And so I close with the final words from today's passage – hear them once more and be at peace: *After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to eternal glory in Christ will restore, support, strengthen and establish you. To God be the power forever and ever. Amen.*

¹ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 181; quoting Moltmann's *The Crucified God*, 1974.