

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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4th Sunday in Lent
Romans 8:18-30

Called Through Suffering

There's a meme which has been making its way around the social media networks. In this Internet age, the word "meme" has come to mean an image or video which is altered, usually for the sake of humor, and then circulates rapidly. In this case, it's a set of 3 related photos, something like a comic strip. In the first box, a man and a small boy are seated on a park bench, and the man asks the question, "When does spring start for you?" The second box is a closeup of the boy's face, his eyes brimming with tears as he says, "I live in Montana." The third box resumes the long view—we see the man holding the boy in a comforting hug, offering his sympathy.

When I saw this meme, I couldn't help but think of Romans 8:18:

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." Yes, spring will come. Our suffering is long, but we will one day know the glory of a Montana summer.

Now I don't mean to be making light of the real suffering that has been experienced this winter in parts of Montana which have been especially hard-hit. There is real human suffering on the Blackfoot, Ft. Belknap, and Northern Cheyenne reservations due to record snowfalls, low temperatures, ice, and wind. And for those who live here in inadequate housing, or in their cars, or on the streets, the longing for spring is more than an emotional need, it is a physical need. But for most of those in this room, the aggravations of this long winter do not qualify as true suffering. Most of us have known, or will know, worse.

For suffering is part of life. Our culture seeks to avoid or deny suffering, but I think there's something we can learn from traditional Asian cultures which assume that life is suffering. As we put together our Year of Call, it became clear that not speaking about the relationship between call and suffering would be dishonest, more of that avoidance behavior. The season of Lent is a season of being honest before God and one another, examining our lives in preparation for considering Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. So to understand how we are called by God through suffering, I have the privilege (and challenge) of unpacking the magnificent 8th chapter of Romans this week and next.

A maxim for preachers which I try to remember is this: In every pew, there is a broken heart. We are broken, and we suffer, because we live in this world. Our suffering is physical—we feel pain, we endure disease, we are breakable and weak no matter how much time we spend in the gym. We are always dying as we live. And our suffering is mental and emotional—we are hurt by others, we seek love and meet rejection, we hurt those we care about the most, and we know our weaknesses, faults, and sin. Suffering is personal, and communal. The more empathetic we are, the more we feel the suffering of others. In every pew, there is a broken heart, broken by life's disappointments, grief, trauma, and anger which has nowhere else to go. This truth is an opportunity, and a calling, to live with the compassion God shows us in Jesus Christ. 20th century Reformed theologian Karl Barth called suffering the door to God, because in suffering we cry out to God and God enables us to participate in Christ's suffering. (Sarah Heaner Lancaster, 2015, *Romans*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 143) So while we do not seek suffering, by acknowledging our suffering we open ourselves up to God.

All of creation suffers with us, and all of creation awaits the completion of humankind's redemption. British writer N.T. Wright explains it this way: "As God sent Jesus to rescue the human race, so God will send Jesus' younger siblings, in the power of the Spirit, to rescue the whole created order, to bring that justice and peace for which the whole creation yearns." (*New Interpreter's Bible*, vol x, 2002, Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 596) We are living in a wrinkle in time in which we see God's purpose revealed in Christ—and sometimes, even in us!—but not yet fully accomplished, not yet fully realized. In this mean time, this longing time, we wait with eagerness, and with patience fueled by hope. In this suffering time, this yearning time, we join God's work through prayer, and when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit prays on our behalf. In this groaning time, this laboring time, we live by faith, trusting that a new way is being born, a transformed world we have seen and known in Jesus Christ. There is more and better to come than what we know and experience now. In the glorious age about to be revealed to us, we will be God's agents bringing healing justice to the whole created order.

Through this suffering, we are called. Some in our day hear God's calling to be agents of healing for the Earth, damaged by human greed and carelessness. Some hear God's calling to renewed relationships among nations, ending war and its senseless destruction. Some hear God's calling to ministries of justice, turning our outrage into constructive change which provides equality of opportunity and hope. Some hear God's calling to be channels of peace for troubled individuals, confused and distressed by their suffering.

All of us are called by God to be remade in the image of Christ, whom Paul describes as our older brother in God's family, the firstborn. A word here about this word "predestined," a word which makes a lot of people uncomfortable. Throughout the salvation story, God chooses particular persons, and in Israel, a particular people. Always, it is for the sake of others. The pattern is Christ-like, that God's renewed people are foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified—so that we might reflect God into the world. The foreknowing is a form of grace, God's reaching out to us. The predestining describes God's purpose, in which a response of love is essential. And the calling is one of sovereign love in which we receive a commission to be one with God and with God's purposes. These verses describe love, not fate, and inclusion, not exclusion. There's no need to get hung up on a single word or verse based on their history of interpretation. (See N.T. Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 602-603)

What these verses are showing us is that though suffering is real, it is not the whole story. Suffering can be disorienting, shaking us out of complacency into rage at God. The story of Job is a story of a life completely disrupted, so much so that he shouted questions at God—where are you? What are you doing? The psalms of lament, about 1/3 of all the psalms, are the voices of suffering demanding that God step in and make things right. Jesus prayed on the night before his death, asking God to take away his cup of suffering. It was not to be. Suffering can challenge our faith, or strengthen our faithfulness as we discover God's presence with us, and then choose to walk with Jesus. Our disorientation leads to a reorientation, and a deeper relationship with God.

That deeper relationship calls us to a deeper relationship of walking with others in their suffering. Sometimes we think we are here to "fix" one another, and we feel like failures when we cannot make the pain go away. But Jesus didn't heal all who suffered in the world around him. Think of all the lame, the leprous, the diseased, the hungry, and the poor of first century Palestine. He healed and fed some, not all, as a sign of God's kingdom. Most of the time, he walked with the people, and his disciples walked with him.

So it is with us. We are called to Christ-like compassion, a word which means “to suffer with.” Rarely do we choose the situation in which this call comes to us. It is given to us. What we can choose is the nature of our response.

It took the experience of caring for her aging father and grandfather at home for Rosalynn Carter, the former First Lady, to gain wisdom about what it means to live the call to compassion as caregiver. She writes, “There are only four kinds of people in the world: those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregivers.” (Quoted by Kathleen Cahalan, 2017, *The Stories We Live*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 104) For many who find themselves in the role of caregiver, it is the hardest calling of their lives. Most would not choose it, if they had a choice. But some discover new wells of sensitivity and awareness, and develop skills of listening and self-care, even to the point of becoming grateful, over time, for the unwanted calling. (See Cahalan, *op. cit.*, p. 105) The call to deeper compassion is the work of God, shaping us to be more like Christ. Sometimes it is through suffering that God speaks to us, and gives us what we need to fulfill that difficult calling, so that we grow toward God.

Maybe it’s more like that man and boy on a park bench discussing the weather than it seems at first glance. The experience of winter makes the summer that much more glorious. The longer we wait, the more grateful we can become. While we wait, we are here to comfort one another, growing together in compassion and love. And as Paul wrote in Romans 5, our suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (vv. 3-5)

May the God of hope fill us all with all joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.