

Proper 22C  
Kanuga 10; All Saints, Atlanta, 5:30  
6 October 2019

Suffering is all around us, and within us. Most of our news reports deal with suffering, whether it's Greta Thunberg lamenting the state of our planet and the elders who have let it happen, or the deep anxiety in Britain about leaving the EU, or the conflict in Washington over what is and isn't proper presidential behavior.

Today's readings are filled with suffering. Jeremiah is wailing over a conquered and empty Jerusalem and the exile of most of its people. That kind of war and violence continues today in Syria and Yemen, Kashmir and Myanmar, Venezuela and El Salvador. Refugees yearn for home and peace, for the freedom to worship and to raise their children. The psalmist says that music and singing have stopped in exile, for there's no reason to rejoice. The psalms are often brutally honest about the reaction to suffering – this one ends with, 'we won't forget the violence done to us, and we pray that your children will die in brutal ways.'

Paul speaks of the suffering that comes of following the Way of Jesus – sometimes mortal violence, sometimes exclusion and ridicule – yet always grounded in hope.

Jesus' followers, then and now, know both reactions to pain and suffering, for they are deeply human; they are part and parcel of our created nature. We are biologically wired to flee violence or resist it. We are also biologically wired to be compassionate in the face of suffering. Which response wins? As the Cherokee tale puts it, 'the one you feed.'

Paul is feeding Timothy in his letter: "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline... Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us."<sup>1</sup> Jesus is continually feeding his disciples with food and food for the soul. Luke's passage today includes servings of courage and patience, both of which are essential for compassion and transformation.

Remember that Hebrew word, *chesed*? It's about faithfulness and loving compassion. It describes God hanging in there with us for the long haul – that much-dreamed-of destination in the depths of our souls. The apostles want more faith, more confidence in the reality of that dream, more courage to stay the course, even if they won't waken to it in this life. Jesus assures them that a stout-rooted mulberry tree would move to salt water if they had even a whisper of that abiding faith. And then he asks a series of ridiculously rhetorical questions. Would you ask a slave to feed himself before he fed the owner? Wouldn't you tell him to serve your dinner and eat his later? So what if he's a field hand and now you want him to cook and serve your dinner – he's supposed to be at your command. And would you really bow down in thanks after your meal?

Then comes the zinger. 'So, you students, do what God commands, and when you're asked, just say you're doing your job – and no pay is expected.' That shouldn't be a bitter pill; it's simply what it means to walk the Way of Jesus. Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself, come hell or high water. I think you know something about high water in this part of the world. The hellish experiences of flood and drought, fire and disaster usually bring out the

---

<sup>1</sup> 2Tim 1:7,14

deepest sort of compassion for strangers, former enemies, and all sorts of neighbors. They don't usually ask for pay.

The little disasters are harder for most of us. We expect that somebody will show up on time, or do us some service in a particular way, or use a turn signal before changing lanes. We think we're in charge of our lives, and then some chaos intervenes. Which response takes over – threat or compassion?

Years ago, I watched an interaction on an airplane that stuck with me. A man sitting by the window in our row very deliberately undid his seat belt, turned around and knelt on his seat, and gently said to the guy behind him, "I'm really worried about you." The fellow behind had been leaning on his tray table and pounding on it. It was attached to the seat in front, and the man in that seat was getting pounded as well. I don't know if he was mentally ill, despairing, or drunk. But he sat up and stopped, and settled back into his seat. The man in front addressed him with compassion and prompted a peaceful response rather than a violent one.

Once I was flying back to Las Vegas from some church meeting. The flight attendant had brought a bottle of champagne to the newlywed couple to my left. Some minutes on, I realized that one of them had thrown a full glass of it into the other's face. I got out a business card, wrote the name of a marriage therapist's book on the back, and said to them, "congratulations on your marriage. This might help in the days and years to come." Both of them teared up, and I prayed that their stay in Sin City might be a joyous one.

We can practice compassion. It can seem really hard to intervene when a stranger is upset, but it gets easier once you start. Simply speaking gently to somebody, like "can I help?" often helps the person self-regulate, i.e., love himself, or reminds her that she is loved and lovable.

Friends of Jesus are meant to show compassion toward all neighbors, human and not. We don't get paid for it, but the peace that comes instead of fear or violence is an amazing blessing to everyone in the neighborhood. Approaching with a smile rather than a scowl works wonders. Asking ourselves 'why is that person upset?' can slow down our own anger and invite us into compassion mode.

We spent yesterday morning thinking about compassion and wondering how it becomes leadership – how it helps transform suffering. Much of the world's suffering comes from structural evil that isn't simply somebody being nasty, and a great deal of it has to do with defining some people as unworthy of love, or subhuman. All the 'isms' are part of cultural structures doing just that – racism, sexism, body shaming, discrimination against children, elders, the differently abled, immigrants, the poor... like the man beaten by robbers on his way to Jericho. The Samaritan wasn't supposed to be in community with the victim, but he saw a hurting human being and acted. He took responsibility, which is what Jesus tells his disciples. You can heal – now go do it!

What's our responsibility in the face of community suffering? We see remarkable responses to natural disasters, like the gutting and rebuilding after Katrina. What about the devastation in our inner cities? Poverty is a real pain, and it's rampant. Most is the result of structural injustice – the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, the removal of Native Americans from their homes and cultures, redlining, inadequate school financing, inequitable taxation, and prioritizing individual ownership and profit-making over the well-being of whole communities.

By now, I expect you think I've gone from preaching to meddling, but that's my job. It's our job as Christians. William Barber has stepped up in North Carolina, bringing people to the State House for 'moral Mondays,' asking the faithful to prod legislators to be compassionate, to love everybody else as they love themselves. Moral Mondays came to Georgia 5 years ago.<sup>2</sup> You can start by naming the suffering – you just might prompt compassion in your hearers. Name the outlines of justice, paint a picture of what healing looks like. Be patient (suffer!) and persistent, like the widow pounding on the judge's door. Nag if you have to. Be peaceable and creative, passionate and pesky, but don't be passive. Love isn't rude but it does stay true; it keeps on the road toward justice – toward God's justice. Our ability to be compassionate brings peace and justice in small ways and large. We're bound for shalom and the Reign of God. That's where the Jesus road is leadin' – and it's time to get... *on the road again*.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://actionnetwork.org/groups/moral-monday-georgia>

<sup>3</sup> Apologies to Willy Nelson.