

Suffering: Nevertheless...

From the Midweek Lenten series:
Job and Jesus: The Mystery of Human Suffering

Text: Romans 8:18-39; Mark 14:32-42

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Jesus expressed the ultimate in human suffering with his cry of dereliction: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" We raised the question last week: Are We Abandoned? And suggested that it was in the sense of abandonment, in the consciousness of the absence of God, that we had a tenuous link to the presence of God. For one does not miss what one has not experienced. So, ironically, paradoxically, the very absence was a sign of the presence. That experience of abandonment and knowing the presence only in the absence was the deepest of human suffering and the nadir of Jesus' anguish.

The garden experience was the place where he waged the greatest conflict and won. It was not on the cross that he won the victory. It was in the garden. On the cross the die was set; the die was cast. There he experienced the abandonment and the awful suffering. But in the garden it was the struggle to be true. It was the last chance. His entry into the garden was not marked by a sign "No Exit." It could still have been different. But it was with a poignant awareness of what lay before him that he struggled there. Lest we take away at all from that suffering, we must recognize that Jesus was not some stoic, setting his chin, gritting his teeth, simply going through with it. He was not a fatalist, throwing up his hands, saying, "Whatever will be, will be." It was in the garden that he said, "Please release me." He did not want to go through with what he was going to go through.

In fact the language that the evangelist uses could not be any stronger. One New Testament commentator says that when Mark records words like, "My soul is crushed within me," it could be translated, "I wish I were dead." So this was no heroic figure. No calm philosophical Socrates draining the cup of poison. This was a trembling human being. This was a human being who knew fear and trembling, and who faced down the darkness, fully cognizant of all of the implications, pleading for release, yet coming finally to say, "Nevertheless. Nevertheless. Not my will but Thy will be done." The irony of that is that in so winning through, in bowing in such obedience, Jesus found the truest human freedom. Had he buckled at that moment, he would have denied his truth. He

would have denied himself. He would have become a slave in bondage to fear, to prejudice, to all of that which was set against him and the truth that he proclaimed. He would have denied his deepest sense of who God was and what God had called him to be, and to do, and to say. He would have lost his freedom and been robbed of his strength if he had saved his life, and so his “Nevertheless,” was really his breakthrough to victory. It was the saving of his soul. It was the holding on to his life. And the very giving of his life. “Nevertheless, Thy will be done.”

In the home in which I grew up, and in the church in which I grew up, and the piety which was a part of the shaping of my life - family prayers, long prayers. (There used to be long prayers in church. That was a pretty good example of our liturgical sense at Third Reformed, Kalamazoo. I had no idea what these various prayers were, but I knew they were long prayers.) There are certain clichés and certain little phrases. I remember as a young person a certain church I attended that was not my own had a pastor I liked to hear quite a bit, but in his pastoral prayers I knew that he was about 1-1/2 minutes from landing when he would call upon God to cast the “lariat of his love around us.” One of the phrases that tripped off the tongue almost without thinking, well, indeed without thinking was “Thy will be done. Thy will be done.” Oh, those are words that sometimes I hardly dare pray, now that I have become somewhat conscious of what those words really mean. It is quite rare with me when I can honestly say, “Thy will be done,” when it runs counter to my will and what I would have done. I am not very good at that point of ultimate submission. I am a rebel. A strong rebel, affirmed of my way.

Jesus in full light of the darkness said, “Nevertheless, Thy will be done,” and ironically won his freedom in bowing to the will of God. That’s not how we see the will of God very often. Usually the human will and the divine will are in competition. They are over against each other. It’s God’s will at the expense of my will. Or if it is my will, it’s at the expense of God’s will. It’s like there’s 100% will out there and whatever percentage I give to God is deducted from my share. So there’s conflict. We never really believe that it is finally in finding the will of God that we find true freedom and the empowerment of our own will to be all that we can be.

So Jesus was able to say, “Nevertheless, Thy will . . .” And in the wake of Jesus, those who follow him have also found a great “Nevertheless.” It has been expressed nowhere more powerfully and beautifully than by St. Paul in the 8th chapter of Romans. That chapter is so replete with riches that one paragraph is enough to give a congregation indigestion in one message. Sometimes I treat it as a paragraph at a time and I forget the string, but beginning with the 18th verse, he talks about suffering. He talks about the fact that the whole creation seems to be caught up in these convulsions. It is almost as though there is a cosmic convulsion, a suffering, a bondage, and a darkness. The Apostle says that we are all in the whole creation - one translation has it “the whole creation is on tiptoe” -

for that day when we will be delivered and freed from this bondage which has its share of suffering and darkness. Then he goes on to give us that marvelous assurance that “in all these things” – that is, in all this crap, that he has been talking about that we have to wade through – “in all these things God works for the good of those who love him.”

I was not welcome last Saturday to this church. It was Woman’s Day, but I got to listen to the tape. My friend, Carmelita Murphy spoke powerfully, as I knew she would. She spoke about the darkness and about being willing to stay for a time in the darkness. That sometimes the darkness becomes the womb of newness, and that in the disarray and the dis-ease, in the brokenness and in the pain lies the seed of the new which is striving to be born, because the Spirit of God also is active in the darkness. Someone in the discussion raised a question; it is a question that I hear often. It is a question often raised by people who are concerned with the present state of things, whether it be the world, the nation, the church, the community, or the family. The question was raised: “But how do we know how to go on when all the norms of the past...there’s just a breakdown all over?”

Carmelita was equal to that question. She said, “Someone has said that breakdown leads to breakthrough.” If we could only believe it. If we could only hang on long enough in the darkness. Oh, don’t get me wrong. I hate the darkness. We all resist the darkness. If we don’t resist the darkness there is truly something dysfunctional about us. To be followers of The Way, we do not need to be masochistic and go out of our way to find suffering, but we don’t really have to because there’s plenty to go around. If only I could remember in the darkness that it is so often the prelude to the dawn and that the brokenness is that which invites the newness that sometimes can only come when we have had forcibly ripped out of our tight fists that which is all settled and safe.

The Apostle concludes with what must be among the most marvelous words ever written. “What are we to say to all these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Famine or nakedness or peril or sword,” cancer, betrayal . . . you name your hurts. “What can separate us from the love of Christ?” All these things? No. None of these things. “For we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” For the Apostle Paul said his “Nevertheless,” in the wake of Jesus’ “Nevertheless.” His “Nevertheless,” wasn’t exactly Jesus’. Jesus’ was “Nevertheless, Thy will be done.” But following Jesus, Paul could say in the face of the deepest darkness that life could hand out,

“Nevertheless in all these things we are more than conquerors. For I am persuaded that neither life nor death, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things in the future, the world as it is or the world as it shall be, nothing in all creation shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So we will kneel tonight and we'll take cup, and we will be in touch with Jesus. As you taste and digest, let this word of promise seep into the pores of your being as well. With the touch and taste of bread and wine, let the word "Nevertheless," become the word that you take into Holy Week, knowing that you will never be abandoned. You will never finally be left alone in the darkness, for you are loved with an everlasting love, and with cords of love God has bound you to God's self. God will never let you go. Let the bread and the cup, the body and the blood be the sign of God's never ending love for you tonight.