

Suffering: The Need For Another

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

Luke 22:14-24

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

We can bear just about anything if we are not alone. We can go through just about any valley if there's someone to walk with us. Unless, of course, we are accompanied by friends like Job had in his deep valley. We call them "miserable comforters" because, although they started out well, by sitting silently for seven days and simply being present to Job, they could not keep silence once Job began to reveal the intensity and the depths and the darkness of the anguish that he was experiencing. The real test of a friend is whether or not they can just absorb all of that pain and darkness that sometimes erupts out of the human heart when it is in the intensity of the dark night of the soul. Job's friends couldn't do that. They began to protest against Job's cries to heaven and his cries against heaven. I suppose that it is because of the experience of a Job, for example, that most of us live lives of quiet desperation, not really revealing who we are. And not really bringing to expression the things that are in our depths.

I have a book on my shelf, an old book really, written by John Powell, *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?* Well, of course, I know why I am afraid to tell you who I am. If I really told you who I was, if I really dared to reveal myself, would you still be able to embrace me? Could you still love me? Or, with Job's friends, would you begin to perhaps defend God, or whatever. *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?* That's part of the deep anguish of human suffering: to feel isolated and alone with no one to whom to reach out and to reveal.

The anguish within. Jesus understood that. On that night in which he was betrayed, he sat at table with his disciples. It may have been the Passover Feast or it may have been the night before Passover. In any case we are told it was at the time of Passover and it was that gathering around the table. I chose Luke's story because of what seems to be a rather peripheral side note I suppose, and yet it's the kind of thing I wanted to say tonight. Jesus sits at table and in the fifteenth verse he says, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you." In the original the word is repeated. "I have desired with great desire." Used once as a noun and once as a verb, expressing the intensity of that desire, that yearning, that longing.

Jesus knows now there is no question about what lies before him. So in this dark night of his soul he gathers around him, with him, those whom he had come to love and to whom he had given himself. He says, "I desire with such great desire to celebrate this feast with you." In our darkest moments we really need another. If there is only someone to whom we can speak. To whom we can reveal ourselves. With whom we can feel so safe that we know that there is nothing that we can reveal about ourselves that will result in our being condemned or judged or rejected. Then we can go through just about anything. Job's friends proved flawed at that point. Actually, Jesus' friends did too because, when they went from table to the garden, he said, "Stay with me and pray." But they fell asleep. We do let one another down so often at the point of our greatest need – that need to know that we are not alone, that our darkness is shared, that our pain is being absorbed by another, and that no matter what we are going through for whatever reason there is still someone there with us. We can go through almost anything if we are not alone.

It was appropriate that this series of Lenten midweek meditations conclude on this night, the theme of which has been the Mystery of Human Suffering, because Passover is really the Old Testament feast of liberation and freedom and deliverance from the cauldron of human suffering. Sometimes I wonder how I lived so long without seeing some things that are so very plain, but for some reason or other I know that, in my growing up and in my training and many years of my preaching, I have identified the Lord's Supper with the death of Jesus for our sin. I perceived it only as a feast of atonement, or a feast of celebration of atonement. Now I believe that is not necessarily the case. A festival of atonement, the Great Day of Atonement, was in the seventh month, the tenth day of the month and it led into a harvest festival, the Feast of Booths, or the Feast of Tabernacles. But that wasn't Passover.

Passover was the annual celebration of the deliverance from Egypt. The Exodus was that prime central event of salvation when God with mighty arm set God's people free from the house of bondage, from the slavery of Egypt. You read the opening chapters of Exodus. You read how the cries of God's people went up to heaven. God heard their cry. The terrible suffering, which is duplicated all over our globe tonight. The horrendous measures of a pharaoh whose power was threatened by the growth of the population of a people. An oppressive ruler. An absolute monarch, totally unfeeling. All of the anguish of that Hebrew situation in Egypt is a paradigm of the ongoing suffering of humankind in the midst of history, and finally God says, "Enough." And God sets God's people free. God says to Moses, "Have the people roast a lamb and be ready to move because this is the night of freedom. It is the deliverance from the oppressive human situation of bondage." God set God's people free. That is the Old Testament experience to which Jesus connects this meal that we celebrate tonight.

In the intensity of his own anguish, having suffered what he suffered – "My God, if possible, lift this cup from me." All of the darkness that he endured, all the

suffering that was his lot – all of that, gathered now and coming down in a heavy shadow upon him, he gathers with those whom he loves. I wonder if he wondered if this Passover he was celebrating, or was about to celebrate, was a sign that God might do again then what God did in Egypt? Maybe so. Maybe he came to conclude that it was not through his teaching, through his modeling out, but that somehow or other he was going to effect the change that had to be effected in the midst of that people, in his dying. We don't really know, except that we know at this point he knew inevitably that he *would* die. But would his death be the means of deliverance and liberation? Would his death be the way by which Israel would be set free, and then perhaps the whole world?

Human suffering is the constant chronicle of darkness. It was true in Egypt in Pharaoh's time. It was true in Jerusalem in Jesus' time. It is true all over our globe tonight. Yet we come to this Passover Lord's Supper to remember, but also to hope. To remember, to be sure. But the Passover in its initial celebration was a feast with sandals and backpacks ready, of a people who were ready to move into a new future. They were ready to go. They were coming out of darkness and they were moving toward the light. They ate bitter herbs. They ate unleavened bread. They didn't forget that from whence they were going to depart, but they knew that they were on their way to something new.

So, for us the Lord's Supper is a Eucharistic feast. It is a feast of Thanksgiving because we take bread and break it, we take the cup and pour it, and we know that it cost the life of one who loved us and gave himself for us. But we know that we do this hastily, hastening toward Easter and toward the light and toward resurrection. So we come, perhaps in our darkness, but we come as a community together because that's what Jesus intended so that we would never have to be alone. So that we could take one bread and drink from one cup and know that we were bound together in community, in communion, because you can endure almost anything if you are not alone. Jesus would make us brothers and sisters, one of another, caring for one another, supporting one another, being there for one another. Knowing that in this darkness the light will dawn, experiencing here in the bread broken and the cup shared, the community in communion that will enable us to move into the dawn of Easter.

I experienced the breaking of bread and the sharing of a cup in a remarkable way a couple of months ago. Before I went on vacation I told you that a friend of many of us, Ernie VanDam – Ernie and Doris who were here for many years – that Ernie was on the threshold of death. I did not think by the time I got down there he would be living. In fact I anticipated getting down there and coming back for his funeral. We got down there and he had come home from the hospital with tubes, sacks, bags and was a shadow of himself. But yet it was Ernie, irrepressible Ernie. Then in the middle of our stay we had a call from a couple of other of our people, Marilyn and Weldy Brumels, who wanted to stop and see Ernie. I said, "Meet us at the gate and we'll go in together," because I had something up my sleeve. I brought a shirt with clerical tabs along with me. Not to wear at the pool.

(Laughter) But just in case. When we arrived at Ernie's I said to Doris, "Open a bottle of wine and give me some bread." Then the six of us—with Ernie in his hospital bed with sacks and tubes and things—we broke the bread, we shared the cup. I hugged him; I kissed him. All of us were weeping together. Loving each other. Made one with bread and cup.

I don't know whether Ernie will be back here or not, but I know that together we experienced the possibility in the darkness and the vulnerability and the mortality of the human situation, of that which lifts and enables us to transcend all of that. It happens at a rail like this, with a table like this and with people like this.

You can go through almost anything if you are not alone.