

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

August 25, 2019  
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 13:10-17  
Isaiah 58:9b-14  
Psalm 103:1-8  
Hebrews 12:18-29

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This morning, I want you to think about suffering. I know...that's not a real uplifting way to start a sermon. But hang in there with me...think about those moments when you have felt defeated, beaten down, sick, or maybe just hopeless. The times you felt life had gotten the best of you. What did it feel like? What did it feel like when you named suffering for what it was?

My guess is that in those moments of suffering you often felt as though no one understood or that you didn't know how you could possibly make it through to the next day. Maybe you wondered how could God do this to me? Why me? Why now? I had so many hopes and plans and dreams.

Suffering in its many forms is an experience we can all relate to. It is one of those parts of life that either can bring us closer to God and to one another or it can drive a wedge so deep within our hearts that our only response is anger and despair, where we shut ourselves off from all that good and uplifting and supportive.

Our Gospel this morning presents us with the story of the crippled woman. We are told she is bent over and that she has been bent over for 18 years. For 18 years she has looked at the ground, only able to see people's feet as they walked by. We can assume that for 18 years she has been unable to work, unable to do typical day to day activities. We can assume she has lived in constant pain and isolation. Her dreams of the life she had hoped for were shattered. This woman is suffering. She has no reason to think that her situation would ever change or that there could be value to her life beyond this stooped over, painful, isolating existence.

If it were me I can promise you I would be angry and tired and probably deeply depressed. I would have a hatred for my body...the body which had let me down. I would be disheartened by the world around me – the world that kept passing me by day in and day out as I sat there. Eventually I would be asking, God, why me?

We can only assume the specifics of this woman's condition but we do know for certain that she didn't ask for help that day. She was just standing there in her broken form, resolved to suffering.

But, Christ saw her. He called her over and in a moment of profound grace laid his hands on her and set her free from her affliction. Those 18 years wiped away. She stood up straight and then, in an action I want us all to remember, she boldly praised God.

It might have been tempting for her to say...hey, Jesus...what took you so long? My life has been miserable. Why did God let me suffer like this when you could have fixed it so easily a long time ago. She could have pointed fingers. But, she didn't. Instead, she rejoices, without complaint, without regret, without bitterness. She rejoices and claims her healing. She is restored to herself and to her community.

So...let me ask you this...was her suffering valuable to her? Or, were those 18 years lost?

What about each of you? How do you look back at your own times of suffering? Maybe you are suffering now...in which case, how are you finding hope and meaning out of the darkness you are facing? To be sure, these are incredibly difficult questions.

And, let's be clear...I don't want us to fall into the trap of saying something pithy like, God gives you only what you can handle. And for goodness sake, let's not start thinking that your suffering is justified in any way. It's not. There is no excuse for suffering or oppression or hardship. There is no time where we should qualify the unfairness or the pain or the loss you may be experiencing. Sometimes the best we can do is name it for what it is and say this hurts so badly.

So name it and then I want us to remember the crippled woman in our Gospel reading. Like her, your suffering is not the end of the story. The Gospel asks us...how do we turn pain into possibility?

This past week, I saw an incredible interview between Anderson Cooper and Stephen Colbert. Both men have lived through an unimaginable amount of suffering that has framed their lives. Colbert lost his father and two brothers in a plane crash when he was just 10 years old. Cooper lost his father at age 10 and his only brother to suicide when his brother was 21 years old. The pain and suffering has been an ever present teacher to both men, certainly not a welcome teacher but a teacher nonetheless.

At one point in the conversation, Anderson Cooper is brought to tears and he asks Colbert, "do you really believe that suffering is a gift?" Colbert responded, "Yes, I do." He went on to clarify what he meant. Colbert said that *life* is a gift and that we are simply asked to accept the world God gives us with love and with gratitude. He said it is a gift to exist and that means that we will experience both joy and suffering because that is the fullness of humanity.

And then he asked something I struggled with. Colbert asked, can we love the thing that we most wished had not happened?

To clarify...he wasn't justifying the suffering. He was not diminishing the suffering. He wasn't making excuses. What he was asking was can we go into the depths of our suffering and still be grateful for the life we are given? Can we turn pain into possibility? If we are to be grateful for our life, can we be grateful for all of it?

Anderson Cooper was struggling with the concept as well. And then Colbert asked one more thing. He asked, what do you get from suffering? It sounded like a trick question on the surface. The answer...when you suffer you now are able to understand someone else's suffering. You now know what they are going through and you can love them more deeply and give more generously because your common humanity, your shared suffering, has built a new bond of compassion. Through the pain we can claim the possibility of connection. We gain the gift of understanding.

When Luke tells us that Jesus saw the woman, he uses the Greek word for "saw" which is translated as to not only see with the eyes but to see with the mind, to really look and know. It conveys a very deep way of seeing, not a surface vision but a vision of one's soul. That's the seeing that comes out of suffering.

Jesus laid his hands on the woman, and immediately she stood up straight. Her pain was gone and now she faced the possibility to use those years of suffering for good. Her praise to God was praise for new life, for new opportunities, for new connections. Her suffering was surely not forgotten. Her suffering had shaped the last 18 years of her life and it would surely shape her future. But now she could see through new eyes the needs of others. Out of her praise grows compassion and her suffering took on new meaning.

I love the words of our Psalmist this morning. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. All that is within me. God I will praise you in my joy. I will praise you in my pain. I will praise you with my whole life. I will praise you for the gift of my life.

Even Isaiah puts it into context. The prophet was speaking to a group of people who were suffering, who were in conflict. Their lives were marked by fear and hardship. And Isaiah says, I know how hard this is. I know how much you hurt. But you can turn that pain into possibility. I want you now to go and feed the hungry. Help the hurting. God will guide you out of your darkness while you guide others out of their own darkness. You will be rebuilt and you be called the repairer of the breach. That is how we turn our pain into possibility.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Amen.