

Being the Church at Brentwood

Suffering and Learning

**Ps 104:1-9 & Hebrews 5:1-10
(645, 370, 647, 274)**

October 21, 2012

Suffering can take away everything God desires for us,
if we let it.

Let me repeat that.

Suffering can take away everything God desires for us,
if we let it.

What God desires for us,
What God has given us
through the priestly work of Jesus Christ
and the enlivening work of the Holy Spirit,
are the gifts of the Spirit names in Galatians 5:22-23:
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, humility, and self-control.

Just think of our own experiences.

When we are suffering pain or loss,
we do not feel loved.
We feel abandoned and alone

When we are suffering pain or loss,
we do not feel joy.
We feel down and despairing.

When we are suffering pain or loss,
we do not feel peace.
We feel restless and distressed.

When we are suffering pain or loss,
we do not feel patient.
We want relief now.

When we are suffering pain or loss,
you do not feel kind.
We feel miserable and cranky.

When we are suffering pain or loss,
we do not feel good.
We feel self-pity.

When we are suffering pain or loss,
we do not feel faithful.
We feel doubtful and angry.

When we are suffering pain or loss,
we do not feel humble.
We feel we are centre of the universe and need help.

When we are suffering pain or loss,
we do not feel self-controlled.
We feel like a victim, beset by forces beyond our control.

When we are suffering pain or loss, then,
the temptations are strong to ignore the gifts
that God has given us all in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

When we are suffering pain or loss, then,
the temptations are strong to give up on the life
God calls us to and enables us to live.

The Christian community to whom the writer of Hebrews is preaching
must have experienced a lot of suffering.
They were discouraged and despairing.
Loved ones had probably died.

Members of the community had probably been rejected and reviled
because they had become Christians.
Members of the community were probably suffering from a variety of illnesses,
some, no doubt, life-threatening,
all irritating and worrisome.

As we have seen among all the writers of letters and sermons
in these early days of people discovering how to be the church,
Christians are urged to remember what God has done for them
in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ
that offers life eternal, both within and beyond this temporary tent we call the body.

God has not abandoned them, but is with them.
That steadfast and unshakeable presence is a source of constant joy,
dispelling doubt and despair when they arise.

In our relationship with God in Jesus Christ energized by the Spirit,
we find a peace that passes simplistic understanding,
calming restlessness and distress when they arise.

Focusing on God's life-giving energy within us and around us,
we can be patient in the midst of suffering,
curious about the new perspectives on life
God may be opening up for us through these experiences.

Thinking of others in addition to ourselves in the midst of suffering
creates a way of being with others and serving others
that brings broader meaning and significance to our lives.

As I was thinking of this particular gift of the Spirit in the midst of suffering,
I recalled the story of Peter Frost who taught business out at UBC.

When first hospitalized with cancer,
he took particular note of the way in which care-givers worked
and the strains and stresses they experienced.
That observation led to using the remaining years of his earthly life
studying the dynamics of toxic workplaces
and how to restore health to those communities.

Out of his suffering emerged a goodness
that attracted a broad community of scholars and practitioners
who are dedicated to compassion in the workplace.

Suffering pain or loss can test our faith and humility.
That, in essence, is the plotline of the story of Job.
In the midst of suffering, it is challenging to let go and let God be in control.

But that is the Biblical encouragement.
That is what the accumulated wisdom of Scriptures offers.
Deal with suffering and pain by letting go and leaving it to God.
You are safe and secure in the hands of your loving Creator.
From such safety and security arises the freedom to flourish
in spite of suffering and in the midst of suffering.

The power and energy to deal with suffering this way
comes from what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

All of the language about priesthood
in the passage we heard this morning
points to the fact that Jesus Christ has suffered everything we have
and has redeemed that suffering through his death and resurrection.

He has conquered death on our behalf.
That conquest removes our fear of suffering
and allows us to learn from it how best to flourish in God's service,
how best to use the gifts of God for the mission of God.

Suffering can take away everything God desires for us,
if we let it.

But we do have the choice.

Victor Frankl lived through the suffering of the Nazi concentrations camps.

Throughout the 1930s, he worked as a psychiatrist in Vienna.
Much of his work prior to his arrest and imprisonment in 1942
was focused on suicide prevention.

He continued to work as a doctor and psychiatrist in the camps.

By the time of his liberation in 1945,
only his sister, Stella, has survived the camps.

His mother, father, brother, and wife have all been killed.

His reflections on his experience of suffering
focused on the power of a sense of meaning and purpose
to sustain people through suffering.

Here's one of the most powerful passages I've found
in the little book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, that he wrote immediately after the war.

He is in the midst of a forced march in the bitter cold,
supporting this fellow prisoners as they stumbled and fall.

*I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and
belief have to impart: **The salvation of man is through love and in love.** (p.38)*

This little book is where we find the insight I've mentioned several times before -
between stimulus and response there is always room for choice.

Through the loving work of the Holy Spirit within us and among us,
God empowers us to choose life rather than death,
to choose to draw upon the gifts of the Spirit rather than ignore them.
The priestly role Jesus Christ plays for the preacher in Hebrews
is another image or way of saying the same thing –
our salvation lies in God's love for us in Jesus Christ
and the love that enables us to share.

We learn from suffering by not letting it deprive us of our full humanity.

We learn from suffering by not letting it deprive us of our right to flourish.

We learn from suffering by using it as a way
into a more meaningful relationship with God, others, and ourselves.

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