The Way of the Cross: Suffering and Compassion

Matthew 9:35-38, 27:27-31 Kimby Young

Romans 5:1-11, I Corinthians 1:18, 22-25 March 26, 2017

When Worship Pillar began planning for Lent, and decided to work with the theme of the cross, I made a list of key meanings of the cross and corresponding traditional themes of Lent – discipleship, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, obedience. Today’s theme of suffering is one of the most obvious meanings of the cross – Jesus suffered and died on the cross. When you see the cross you think of suffering. The meaning behind that suffering is less obvious. At least three layers of suffering are important to consider. First, the suffering of Jesus. Second, our own suffering. And third, the suffering of others – terrible and devastating suffering in the world around us. All of these aspects of suffering are important. And all are hard to understand.

Why must people suffer? Why does God allow suffering in the world? Or if God is responsible for everything that happens, does God cause suffering? When I go thru something difficult, or when you do, is there a reason for it? Is there purpose in suffering? Even more fundamentally, even beyond understanding why – how can we get through suffering? What can we do to make it through difficult times? Or to help others to make it through difficult times? These are all basic questions of our faith, and questions people of faith have wrestled with for generation upon generation. Even back to the writings of Paul which we heard today, even into the Old Testament scripture and the book of Job which we didn’t read today, even back to Genesis and maybe even before, we have struggled to understand evil and suffering in the world. What is its purpose? How can we survive it? How can we alleviate suffering – our own and the suffering of others?

These are fundamental questions of our faith. And in fact Suffering is one of THE greatest stumbling blocks to faith. How could a good and loving God allow human suffering? I have had many conversations with people for whom this is the primary barrier to faith. They see suffering in the world and they cannot believe in a loving God. Others, people of faith like you or me, see suffering in the world and know that our loving God stands beside those who are in need, lifting those who suffer with great tenderness and compassion. Jesus is that God of compassion who takes on the suffering of the world that we might be reconciled to God. Paul says, the idea was absurd that a divine being, or even a human chosen by God, would suffer a humiliating and excruciating death on a cross by execution. Why would Jesus suffer for us? And further was Jesus suffering necessary for our salvation?

I don’t like to think about Jesus’ suffering on the cross – the blood, the pain, the torture. It seems so opposite to my understanding of God as love, compassion, connection, life, light, joy. And yet the suffering is central in our theology. God, as Jesus, took on our full humanity – even our dark and painful side. Jesus was fully human and fully understands our humanity – especially our pain and suffering, our temptation and despair, our weakness and our tendency to hurt one another. Jesus’ betrayal by those he loved, and his brutal torture and death at the hands of corrupt and powerful humans, has forever connected God to our human sin. The suffering of Jesus was not necessary to appease an angry God. The suffering of Jesus was that very God aching to change our lives and transform our destiny for eternity. God so loved us, God so loved the world, and so wanted to pull us out of our misery caused by separation from God, that God came in flesh and blood as Jesus of Nazareth to reconnect with us, to be reconciled with us, and to offer us a way out of suffering, sin and death.

Compassion is that way out. Jesus demonstrates it again and again. Jesus calls us to it as disciples who would follow. Compassion is standing with those who suffer, lifting up those who stumble, helping and healing and walking with those who struggle – doing what we can, whatever we can. You know it. You are good at it. If I had to use one word to describe this congregation it would be compassionate. You understand pain and suffering, and you work to bring healing and wholeness. You understand that compassion is about relationship and connection. You understand that being with someone, feeling with someone, means something. It is important. It is life changing. It is the way of the cross.

We have passed the half way point in Lent – 26 days into a 46 day journey. We are counting down till Easter – 3 weeks from today. One of the many gifts of Lent is the gift of compassion. And that gift is two sided – first, awareness of the compassion of Christ who walks with us as our God of love, and second, activation of that compassion in us as disciples who would serve this God of love. So here is the challenge of our next 20 days of Lent. You will see suffering in the world. Perhaps you will experience such suffering. The challenge is to look for the presence of Christ in that suffering. For Christ is there – the cross tells us that. Wherever you see suffering, Christ is there. Whenever you experience suffering, Christ is here. So when you see suffering, look also for Christ. Point others toward Christ, toward the love of God. Find Christ in any suffering that you see, and lean into that presence of God with us.

Then second, see how you can stand with Christ amid the suffering, how you can bring compassion. Identify ways that you can be God’s love in any situation – bringing hope, shining light, sharing peace, offering grace. Face the suffering in the world head on and be the face of compassion where you are able. And know that in that giving, you stand side by side with Christ. God is with you in all that you do to offer compassion in the face of suffering. May you know God’s presence and power. May you be blessed as you are a blessing to the world.