

In my previous parish I had a good friend with whom I worked. He was a former Southern Baptist pastor, now an Episcopal Deacon, and in between church careers, he had owned a lovely wine store. We worked alongside one another for most of time at Trinity and together we built up our pastoral care ministry, help start an anti-racism community within the church, and led a pilgrimage to Selma, Alabama among other things. We would regularly consult with each other about things work and life related while having lunch at our favorite burger joint near the university. Often in our talks we would explore the nature of faith and how it applies in everyday life. One topic we covered a lot was the idea of suffering as a part of faith, asking the question is it necessary? Is it something that God requires of the faithful? Was suffering simply an evil in the world? Of course, we were never able to answer our own questions, and he and I were never of the same mind about it. But it is an important question to hold, especially when Jesus talks about it as he does in Matthew's gospel.

Jesus continues to carry forward these themes of division and persecution that we heard last week. As he sends out his followers, Jesus is warning them that their work is not for the faint of heart, that they will endure what Jesus will endure. And that they will go out into a world where some will welcome them and their message and others will reject it and them. In true Matthew fashion, there are two responses to the kingdom: to receive it or reject it. There are two kinds of people: those who welcome the kingdom and those who do not. There is no in between...no mushy middle as they say. With dynamics like these, of course there is going to be division and conflict, and then, of course, suffering.

And here is where we have to reckon with the question of suffering. It is fair to ask, is God really interested in dividing families? Is God really looking for a fight? Does God require the death of God's prophets as a kind of sacrifice to God? Is

suffering required as a kind of spiritual purification? And since we're asking, we might as well include the question: did Jesus have to die? And here I am going to say that no, God desires none of these things. God does not desire the death of anyone, the breakdown of community or of individuals; yet they will happen anyway because in a fallen world, these things are inherent to that brokenness. Suffering is just part of the landscape. At the same time, this doesn't mean that God isn't interested in breaking stuff.

Remember that God in Christ is bringing healing to the world, in bringing the kingdom of heaven near Jesus is working to heal all that is broken in the world. And that does mean challenging and dismantling the malformed structures that grown up around us. When Jesus is talking about families, he isn't really talking about wrecking healthy, loving families, but about challenging social structures. Scholars note that Jesus is critiquing social hierarchy which they mention is sustained by lineage and leads to hereditary wealth. Instead, Jesus is redefining family beyond mere bloodlines and property to include all who love God and do God's will.<sup>1</sup> That human loyalties and love aren't simply bound to tribe and relatives, but to the rest of humanity. Not everyone is going to respond well to this...again, this breaks up structures of power. It is the same when Jesus talks about persecution by governors and kings. It is deliberately provocative for Jesus to talk about replacing earthly kingdoms with a heavenly kingdom because it automatically sets up God's kingdom for conflict with earthly kingdoms and governments. Remember how in Matthew's gospel, the infant Jesus is born into immediate persecution with Herod seeking his life. But this dynamic has always been true throughout scripture: that God's loving rule and desire for a just and righteous humanity stands in opposition to the power-seeking, coercive and

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<sup>1</sup> NRSV pg. 1765

exploitative tendencies of earthly rulers. And earthly rulers will use whatever tool at their disposal to stay rulers.

To proclaim the kingdom is to stand in this place of opposition, to stand with one foot placed in a new vision and reality of the world, while having the other planted in this world. This is to stand at a threshold, that place where the kingdom is coming near and meets the kingdoms of the earth. That's a hard place to be. It like two weather fronts meeting one another, there's turbulence, everything is unsettled, there's thunder and lightening as they cross into each other. And that is just how it is. But to stand here is to trust that come what may, God remains steadfast. We see this clearly in the lives of saints, who endured suffering and persecution without being lost to them, but who persevered out of love for God.

Oscar Romero was an outspoken critic of the El Salvadorean government and an advocate for the impoverished and marginalized. His work was one of peace, yet simultaneously calling out the injustices of the government and society. He was martyred after just having said mass by an agent of a Salvadorean politician and death squad leader. God did not desire Romero's death, but Fr. Romero still gave his life for the kingdom.

Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry the cross of Jesus. Forced to help deliver an innocent man to his death. Author Kreg Yingest reminds us: "A couple years earlier, Jesus had taught his followers that if an enemy forces you to go with him one mile, go with him two. Jesus actually gives his followers the upper hand in this scenario; we have the last say-so. Your evil intention cannot outdo my good one. Your injustice cannot take away my dignity."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Everything Could Be A Prayer. Pg.117

Harriet Tubman, born enslaved yet escaped only to return 13 times to liberate over 70 slaves putting her life in danger each time she did it.

Corrie Ten Boom and her family lived in Holland when it was occupied by Nazis. There they decided to hide their Jewish neighbors so as to save them from the death camps. They knew it could cost them everything and indeed, they were discovered and they themselves, like so many Jews were sent to concentration camps where Corrie lost both her father and her sister. Yet, in spite of all this Corrie “was able to proclaim what her sister had told her: “There is no pit so deep that God’s love is not deeper still.”<sup>3</sup> Corrie survived the camp and the war and afterward shared her story of loss and God’s steadfast love.

Catherine of Siena spent much time with the sick and the poor, giving them the things they needed. As a child she had visions and desired to spend most of her time in prayer. Catherine’s family struggled with her choices but in the end allowed her to follow her call and she became a Dominican postulant. She became a nurse and cared for patients with leprosy and cancer, worked with the ill during plague, visited condemned prisoners, arbitrated feuds and prepared sinners for confession. She died from exhaustion at the age of thirty-three.<sup>4</sup>

These are just a few examples of what Christ is talking about in our scripture today. People who did not let fear stop them from loving their Creator, people who did not let suffering slow their work, people who believed that God’s love could not be stopped or banished from anywhere no matter how dark. In their lives we see examples of humans facing the divisions and suffering of the world just as Christ did, their lives being a witness to God’s great love for humanity, God’s desire to

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<sup>3</sup> Everything Could Be A Prayer. Pg. 157.

<sup>4</sup> Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints. Pg. 350

soothe souls and mend wounds, God's willingness to stand in that place of tumult and bring peace to it.

So, in my mind suffering is unavoidable, but how and why we face difficulties such as choosing the kingdom or not, makes the difference between suffering that is just suffering: meaningless and empty, or suffering for a cause that make sense of it all and leads us into hope rather than despair, to the Kingdom of God coming closer and closer to us. To paraphrase a Friedrich Nietzsche quote: if you know your why you can endure any how. And our why is Christ. Our why and everything we hold to be true is found, for us, in Christ. Furthermore, endurance in the good news means we don't give up on anyone, regardless of how they respond to us, but continually hold onto the hope that God is doing a new thing in everything and in everyone and that in the end, we will all be standing together on the other side of the divisions and brokenness, standing in some place new and wonderful. God hasn't given up on us, let us not give up on God.