

Call to Worship

We see God in the mysteries of moments, moving toward us in the grandeur of mountain and sea, then touching our lives in the loving presence of a humble person.

We see God in silent moments when truth is starkly present, and in music that reaches what seems to be empty spaces in our souls. We celebrate the presence of the Christ.

The Word

1 Peter 3: 13-18

Who will harm you if you are zealous for good? But happy are you, even if you suffer because of righteousness! Don't be terrified or upset by them. Instead, regard Christ as holy in your hearts.

Whenever anyone asks you to speak of your hope, be ready to defend it. Yet do this with respectful humility, maintaining a good conscience. Act in this way so that those who malign your good lifestyle in Christ may be ashamed when they slander you.

It is better to suffer for doing good (if this could possibly be God's will) than for doing evil.

Christ himself suffered on account of sins, once for all, the righteous one on behalf of the unrighteous. He did this in order to bring you into the presence of God. Christ was put to death as a human, but made alive by the Spirit.

Prayer of Invocation

Spirit of truth, be in our midst today. Jesus promised he would not leave us orphaned or abandoned. He said the Advocate would be with us forever and that we would know we are not separated from God. Bring your Spirit of truth to us now that we might know God is with us. Shine through our darkness with your illuminating light, and for these moments help us to know ourselves simply as your beloved children. In the name of the Risen Christ we pray. Amen.

Living the Word

At the end of last Sunday's service, when we look ahead, I gave the sermon title for today and told you I wasn't sure what God had in mind to go with that title...'Good Suffering?' Sermon titles and scriptures are planned months in advance...right now I have topics through summer and September. Doing this facilitates our music department's planning and also the congregation, with great anticipation of what God has ahead for us!

I trust that the scripture choices and titles have some inspiration from God, and in the right time I will know what I am to share with you as The Living Word.

I have made notes on occasion when I have had one of those bittersweet week. It was a few years ago that were very full of high and low emotion, with the addition of feeling God's presence holding me up and then lifting me higher.

It began on a Saturday: officiating a Wedding, and on Monday attending my cousin's funeral and then four days of inspiring worship and lectures at the Festival of Homiletics. By the end of that week, my heart, brain and soul were so full, it was difficult to focus on what God wants me to share. I had about 50 sermons flowing through my brain, so I made some notes to be preached at some time. I promise you won't get them all this morning. I have been thinking for awhile that this sermon was going to be on suffering, but I know now it is more about the 'good' part of the title.

Even in the best events of our lives there is sacrifice and some suffering. This is not to diminish agonizing suffering of body, heart and soul, but to say that we all suffer at times in many different ways. It becomes more a matter of how we handle the suffering. Can we learn from it or do we fall into despair?

Good suffering comes from sacrifice, which leads to something good. Just as the military work for freedom, which at the least includes sacrificing time and place with family, so, too we have big and small sacrifices that we make in our lives to strive for something better. We give of ourselves for others and in the doing or being we are also blessed.

So where was the sacrifice, the suffering and the blessing in the notes from that long ago overflowing week? IT began with a wedding. I was asked to officiate at a wedding at a neighboring United Methodist Church. It meant giving up Friday night and Saturday home with my family; it meant covering another church while they were between pastors. They had gone through the pre-marriage counseling with the pastor who was now in a new appointment, so though we met once, I barely knew the couple.

It meant risking myself enough in front of a wedding party of 6 men and 6 women that I didn't know, to share a few tips about not partying the night before the wedding when they would be standing in the middle of the afternoon in unfamiliar clothes – and shoes- on the morrow and didn't want to add queasiness to the mix. You may wonder where the sacrifice was in that, but let me tell you the men were all much bigger than me.

There is always one in the bunch who thinks that they will show me that they can handle it all themselves. They are the ones that look a bit 'under the weather' at the wedding. I just smile my motherly smile, knowing that what they are feeling is not good suffering, but still hopefully they can learn from the experience. All-in-all, any sacrifice that I made was worth the experience as I acquired time building new relationships in my life.

Sunday evening and Monday morning I spent, back where I grew up in River Falls with my father's family, at the visitation and funeral of my cousin Larry. Why do we put ourselves through the pain of gathering with those who will make us cry and feel sad? Why do we have a service of memorial, when it is so bittersweet to hear the memories and stories that make our heart ache?

That is the sacrifice and the suffering, attending when you know that it is going to hurt, yet going anyway. The good part is in sharing our grief; being surrounded by those who have the suffering in common with us. Knowing that we are not alone on this life journey; looking to Christ and seeing how life happens, death happens and resurrection happens in all of our lives.

There was a prophet names Jeremiah, he has his own book in the Bible, it is between the book of the prophet Isaiah, who wrote of the coming of a Messiah – Good News and the book of Lamentations which tells of the suffering of the Hebrew people that fell upon them as they were captured and taken into exile.

This is the middle part of the story. Jeremiah was sent to the people to warn them about the destruction to come of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonian people and the end of their kingdom as it currently was.

"Jeremiah, bought a field." It's obvious that Jeremiah was no businessman. Didn't Jeremiah know that the Babylonians were coming? Couldn't Jeremiah see the Babylonian army camped just outside the gates of the city? But Jeremiah bought a field.

Everybody else was trying to convert their holdings into cash. Wall Street was about to collapse, the bottom was going to drop out of the market. The Babylonians were coming! But Jeremiah bought a field.

Admittedly, real estate is usually a good investment. Buy some land, hang on to it for a few years, and then sell it at a profit. But Jeremiah didn't have a few years. Jeremiah didn't have even a few days. The Babylonians

were coming! The Babylonian army was already besieging Jerusalem. The Babylonians would soon own all the real estate. But Jeremiah bought a field.

Of course, we know that Jeremiah was in his right mind. We know that Jeremiah didn't buy that field as a business investment, nor did he buy that field for sentimental reasons. No, Jeremiah bought that field for one reason, and one reason alone: Jeremiah bought that field because God told Jeremiah to buy that field.

Jeremiah bought that field as an act of faith. Jeremiah bought that field as a symbol of Jeremiah's faith in God – God, who held in his hand Jeremiah's future, and the future of Jeremiah's people. Jeremiah bought that field as an act of faith and as an example of hope for people who were about to lose everything, including their freedom.

These were people whose world had been turned upside down. Everything they had ever known, everything they had depended on, their very way of life – all of it was about to be taken away from them. These people were scared. Yet Jeremiah bought a field. Hope of resurrection comes if we can look at the future through God's eyes.

Back to my notes: Monday afternoon through Thursday afternoon of that long week, I attended the Festival of Homiletic in downtown Minneapolis. It is the annual preaching conference, which brings together 1800 preachers from all over the world to hear sermons and lectures from the best mainline professors, theologians and preachers also from all over the world.

A different kind of suffering – driving every morning and evening in and out of Minneapolis; sitting for hours, with only short breaks in pews, some with cushions, some without; sacrificing work time at the office – which meant lots of catch-up in the coming week. Eight sermons and eight lectures in four days...some would call that a sacrifice, yet our minds and souls were fed, to say nothing about the music woven through the event.

Can you imagine 1800 preachers singing together 'Amazing Grace' and all the old hymns on one day and bouncing to praise music the next; clapping to bluegrass in one worship and singing the blues at the next. This is what we call Continuing Education for the pastor, and I am thankful that the United Methodist Church insists upon us finding ways to learn and be refreshed in this way.

At the risk of making this seem like a vacation slide show of all of the things we experienced, I do want to share some tidbits that fit well with good suffering in our lives. God's Holy Spirit is always helping me put notes and sermons together during each week, if I willingly pay attention...

First Sermon: "Singing Our Way to Faith" given by David Lose, Senior Pastor at Mt Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Using Ephesians 5 which says *"because these are evil times...be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts..."*

Even so, the suffering is real as found in Psalm 137, which takes us back to Babylon and the trials of the Hebrew people taken into exile: *'Alongside Babylon's streams, there we sat down, crying because we remembered Zion. We hung our [harps] up in the trees there because that's where our captors asked us to sing; our tormentors requested songs of joy: "Sing us a song about Zion!" they said. But how could we possibly sing the LORD's song on foreign soil?'*

David Lose said: "How can you not?" and he went on to share why we must sing: "it makes us happy; singing together builds comradery; it makes difficult hours pass more quickly. The slaves knew that singing asserts a spiritual identity; it restores the soul; it edifies our spirit, it ennobles ones person; and it teaches us the faith.

Singing helps us confess our faith and in singing we hurl our defiance of death. We sing, so what we sing may be true to us, as we are able to believe it. Singing is a reminder that God still cares for us and in these hymns we are asking God to make these words true."

Kevin Kling, whose commentaries you may have heard on NPR Radio, shared with us his story of being born with a congenital birth defect — his left arm is about three-quarters the size of his right arm, and his left hand has no wrist or thumb. More than five years ago, Kling was in a motorcycle accident. The brachial plexus nerves in his right arm were pulled completely out of their sockets. Currently, he has partial use of his left arm and cannot use his right arm at all.

He told us that though he was disabled, the 'DIS' does not mean 'can't do', but that he will now do it differently; that he will never be cured in this lifetime, but he has been healed. He also gave us the three phases of prayer: 1. 'Gimme' prayers; 2. 'Help me please' prayers; and 3. Thank you for the blessings in the midst of my curses.

Dr. Anna Carter Florence, professor of preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary, spoke of living in a 'parable universe'. Not a parallel universe but a parable universe; a place where if we pay attention we will see God at work.

The last few weeks there have been people from this congregation sewing Anti-COVID 19 masks for others they may not even know. Last Saturday, a couple of members from this church did roadside cleanup along a mile of highway B, east of our church, because someone from the community asked our church to do that. Or the people who stood outside on Thursday evening to help register people so they can get a share of food through Ruby's Pantry. This is what good suffering can be - A time when we step forward for justice for others and it becomes a story of hope for the future.

The parable would go something like this: The kingdom of God is like a person who asked few friends to find the materials and sew masks to be handed out to others who don't have the materials or knowhow to sew. They gave of themselves for the future benefit of others that they may never even meet, and they didn't quit until they found a cure. In the work they found a blessing.

Anna Carter Florence went on to say that "we have to see the world around us, know the people and see the ones living in the darkness. We need to pay attention to where the Realm of God is breaking in."

Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, retired Episcopal Priest, author and theologian reminded us that "God dwells in the deep darkness; and some of his best work is done in the dark." She listed for us many biblical stories as examples. She ended by saying "Dark is not a place to just get through, but a place to work through slowly. We would never choose it, but later we would never give it back."

Rev. Otis Moss III, Pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, shared that the Blues are song by people who have been 'kissed by the Sun'. He told us that you can't preach the Gospel (good news) without having known the Blues. He said "Our [stories] are born at Life Avenue and Biblical Boulevard." And that we can face the blues without falling into despair, by moving to the Gospel.

Bishop Yvette Flunder, Presiding Bishop at City of Refuge UCC in San Francisco, reminded us that if we can't fix something we want to blame someone. She then said "If we blame God, well then God doesn't aim well. People thought that Hurricane Katrina was God punishing New Orleans for its sinful ways when it hit. But it was the area of the homes and churches that were destroyed and the French Quarter was spared. We have to get the focus off of what has happened or how it happened and on what God is about to do!"

After many more examples of how we can help remove the wounding stigmas that cause people today to suffer, she ended by telling us preachers to "Preach out of our messes."

I could go on and on, but one more for you: Brian McLaren, former pastor now author, speaker and progressive activist. He began with "we love the church! There is fear in the decline of the structure of the mainline church, but there are great advantages in our disadvantages.

We have to just start lighting fires; try to stir up hope and courage. You can't light someone else's fire unless yours is lit. Tend to your own inner flame; share encouragement, light fires and issue permission slips; give permission to dance."

He then went on to tell a story of the middle ages when the people came for worship and stood for hours to hear the scriptures read and preached on. Because the preacher didn't want to seem above God's word, they spoke all of it in a monotone. It was noticed that the people seemed to be getting more out of their time watching and listening to the dramatic bards who told stories and sang music.

Slowly, as the church always seems to move, the church changed, but now the people were moving to the music – dancing – and that was sinful. So they installed pews to keep everyone in place. That is where pews originated, a ploy to stop the people from dancing.

McLaren said, "We have to recapture the joy of the Lord which is our strength. We have to start thinking outside the boxes we may have been given in Sunday School and Confirmation about how we must worship and praise God. There is an urgent rhythm of mission and the church is moving very slow [to address it].

We don't dance to celebrate getting out of danger, we dance to survive the danger. It is when things are bad that we need the joy of the Lord. In the dance our movement becomes part of the healing. It is about justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

So today if I look tired, it is because I have relived the busiest week I ever wrote about and I am full of joy from days of good suffering, in my life and seen in a parable universe around me where my God reigns and I am feeling very blessed.