

## JOINING US IN OUR CRY

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Matthew 26:36-46

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The Community Church of Sebastopol  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent – March 26, 2017

### I.

Today we have arrived at the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in the season of Lent.

The days are lengthening and we are deepening into the practices of memory, truth-telling, community, and today, suffering.

I think it is safe to say that the dominant culture of the west does not practice suffering very well.

To begin with, we don't see suffering as a practice to engage, but a misfortune to avoid.

This is our view despite the fact that suffering in life is a given.

The first noble truth of Buddhism is that "life is suffering."

To say that "life is suffering" is not a dour or pessimistic view of human experience; it is an empirical observation.

I think that our culture's dual belief in the sanctity of progress and the individual make it hard for us to practice suffering.

On the one hand, we have a dogmatic belief that progress is life and stagnancy is death.

On the other hand, we regard the experience of the individual as the most sacred aspect of reality.

If you put progress and the individual together, suffering becomes a set-back, an embarrassment, a sign that a person isn't strong enough to move forward.

And yet this goes against millennia of religious practice that treats suffering as the very means of spiritual progress for individuals and communities.

While in college, I led a group of my peers to work for a month at a Habitat for Humanity project outside of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.

The night we arrived in the village where we would be working, we were invited as guests to an evening worship at a Pentecostal church.

We struggled with rusty Spanish to follow the service, especially the sermon, but the real struggle came during what we call in this church the "Joys and Concerns."

Following a decade of guerilla warfare and government repression, this congregation and its surrounding community had suffered heartbreaking losses.

For them, the time of corporate prayer was a time of embodied and vocalized lament.

Congregants came forward and begin wailing.

The first cry sent a shiver up my spine...

As voices were added the siren of suffering became almost unbearable.

Alarmed, I looked around to see whether other congregants looked disturbed. Not in the least.

In that church, audible expression of grief was normal and necessary.

As the wailing continued, I wondered when, and how, it would all end.

Eventually a lay minister came and stood in the middle of the lamenting people.

They gradually quieted themselves as he offered a prayer.

At the end of the prayer, after the "Amen," they returned to their seats and the service continued as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

Meanwhile, the 6 of us who were their northern neighbors, took days recovering from the experience.

We had never developed such a practice of communal suffering and had a hard time absorbing that experience of brazen public lamentation.

## II.

The English word suffer comes from two much older words, one meaning underneath, as in "sub," and the other meaning to carry, as in "ferry."

Therefore, to suffer is to lift and carry the reality of life, your own and that of others within and even outside your community.

On the night of his arrest Jesus takes three of his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray.

This prayer is not the stereotypical idyllic prayer with hands folded and head bowed, serenely trusting in the presence of a gracious God.

This prayer is agonizing, the epitome of suffering.

This prayer is a heart-wrenching, knock-down, drag-out battle between what Jesus knows must happen and what he would rather have happen.

Jesus has brought his disciples with him to Gethsemane, and he makes a simple request: "Sit here while I go over there to pray."

Then he takes three of the disciples – Peter and the sons of Zebedee – a little further. You'll recall that these three are the same who accompanied him to the mountain on the day of his transfiguration.

In the presence of these three, Jesus submits himself to suffering.

The text observes that he began to be grieved and agitated.

Can you imagine Jesus in that moment?

The person who spoke with authority about the coming of God's transforming kingdom of justice;  
The person who not only touched but healed people with all manner of diseases and conditions;  
The person who cast away demons like banana peels into a compost bin;  
The person who stared down the authorities who tried to undermine him;  
That person is now in the garden, agitated and grieving, wailing, or perhaps groaning under the weight of the reality of his life and calling.  
These are the words he uses: "I am deeply grieved, even to death."

Perhaps you've known that sort of grief, or you have witnessed it in the life of another.

I once counseled a woman whose fiancé took his own life a few months before their wedding date.  
She found the courage to ask out loud whether her own life was worth continuing.  
Hers was a grief that overwhelmed her capacity to bear the reality of her life.  
She was "deeply grieved, even to death."

In Gethsemane, Jesus asked his three trusted disciples, to "remain here, and stay awake."  
Then the text tells us he went "a little farther," and "threw himself on the ground and prayed" these words: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want, but what you want."  
In the poetry of the prophet, Jeremiah, the cup is a symbol of suffering.  
If you're a Harry Potter fan, you might think of Dumbledore in the cave, drinking the Emerald potion which brings fear, then delirium, then extreme thirst.  
Jesus suffers with the decision whether to drink from the bitter cup, whether to continue on a path which he knows will lead to violent death, or whether to choose another path.

In Gethsemane, Jesus knows, on some deep level, that God's will is that he continue on his path, that he submit himself to death.  
And yet he struggles, suffers, wonders if there might be another way.  
For many of us, this is the moment where Jesus' humanity is on full display.  
He suffers with whether to embrace or resist the path before him.  
But his suffering is exacerbated by the fact that the disciples can't stay awake, can't be and bear with him.  
Three times he returns to find that they have fallen asleep.  
And who are we to blame them? It's just too much to bear.

Even if we like to see ourselves as compassionate people, there is such thing as compassion fatigue, we can only face suffering for so long. Even the wailing in the Guatemalan church had a limit. We might identify with character of May in "Life of Bees" who becomes so overwhelmed by the sorrow of the world that she lays down in the waters of a creek, clutching a heavy to her chest. The suffering of the world, the suffering of Jesus at Gethsemane, the suffering in our own life, can be all too much to bear.

### III.

What do we do with suffering that is too much to bear?  
What would it look like to practice suffering in a way that can bring life to ourselves and our community and to the wider world?

First, it is important to recognize that Jesus should not always be a model for us, which is another way of saying that it is important to recognize that we confess Jesus as the Messiah, God's anointed and appointed one, and we are not.

Yes, we are followers of Jesus, and Jesus admonished his followers to pick up your cross and follow me, but our cross is not the same as Jesus' cross.

Far from being an example we should emulate, Jesus' suffering and death expose once and for all the death-dealing powers of violence.

Following in the way of Jesus means following in the way of life, which means we should do all we can to alleviate unnecessary suffering in our own and others' lives. Too much of church history is plagued by theology that has sought to keep oppressed people oppressed, to keep shamed people ashamed, to keep powerless people powerless.

That is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is life and justice and peace and healing.

But suffering cannot be avoided. It is a part of life. We ignore it at our own peril.

So what positive role can the practice of suffering have for us?

Franciscan Richard Rohr writes: "Suffering of some sort seems to be the only thing strong enough to both destabilize and reveal our arrogance, our separateness, and our lack of compassion. I define suffering very simply as 'whenever you are not in control.' Suffering is the most effective way whereby humans learn to trust, allow, and give up control to Another Source. I wish there were a different answer, but Jesus reveals on the cross both the path and the price of full transformation into the divine."

If Rohr is correct, the practice of suffering gives us the opportunity to reveal reality to ourselves.

The practice of suffering reveals the lie of hermetically-sealed individuality.  
The practice of suffering reveals our lack of compassion, our willingness to numb and distract and ignore the condition of other people.  
The practice of suffering builds up our ability to surrender – I know that sounds paradoxical, but I think it's true.  
It takes practice and strength to let go of the illusion of control.  
And letting go of the illusion of control leads to transformation.  
I am no longer a self-made person, but someone who exists in a web of relationships with other people, with creation, and with the creator and author of all of life.

#### IV.

There is a verse in Romans that gets read often at memorial services.  
And I wonder if we can hear it anew today.  
God's Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."  
In other words, when we pray, it is not we who are praying, but the Spirit who is praying in and through us.  
Which means that when we grieve, it is not only we who are grieving, but the Holy Spirit grieving in and through us.  
In this sense, whenever we lament, whenever we fall on our faces, praying with grief unto death, whenever we cry out because it is all too much to bear, the Spirit is joining us in our cry.  
And the Spirit never sleeps, never slumbers, always has the capacity to hear and to hold the deepest resonances of our pain.  
While the church haltingly deepens its capacity to be and bear with one another, the Spirit is already that community.  
Amen.